R. Garcia y Robertson: Strongbow

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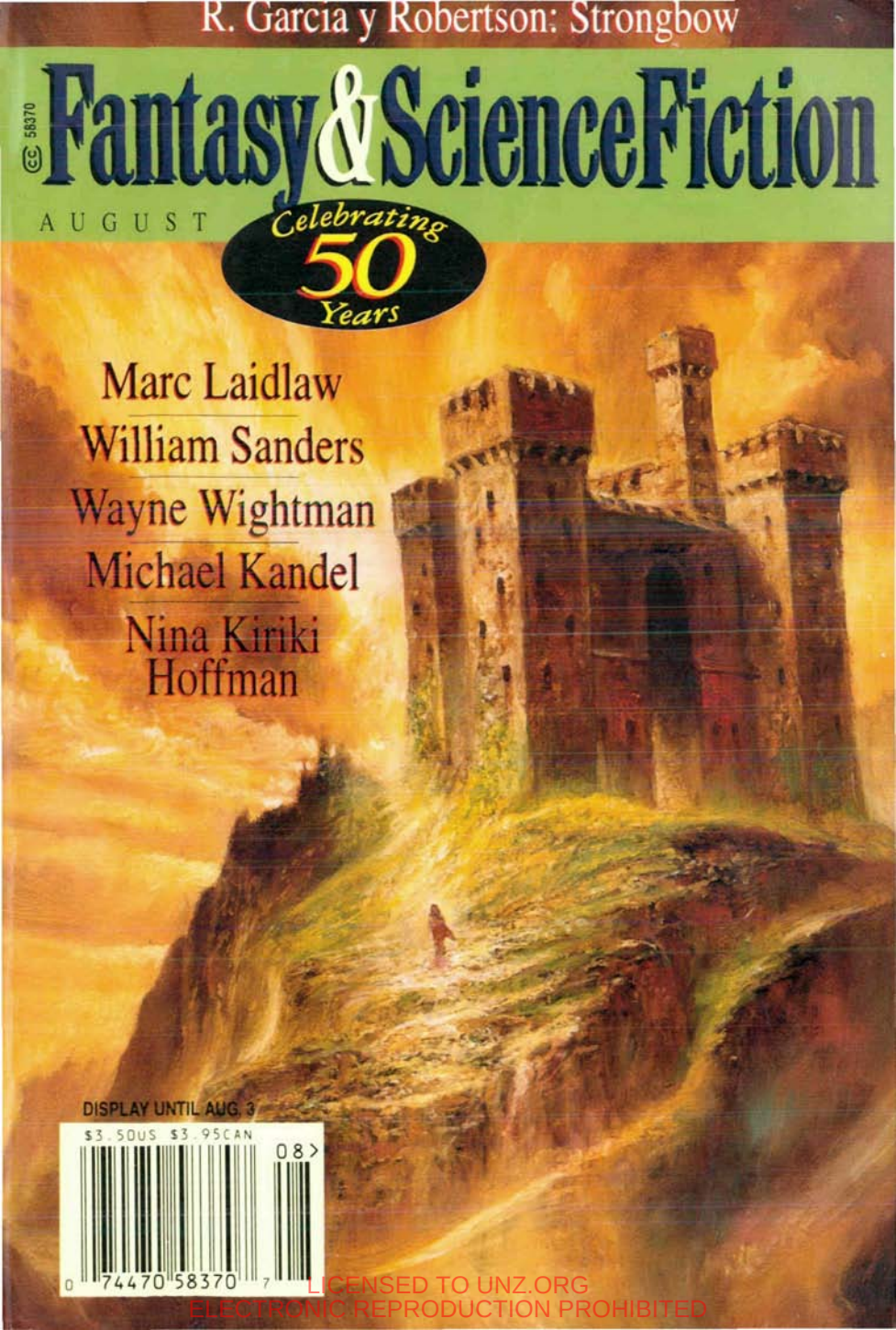

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Rod Garcia is the author of such novels as The Spiral Dance, American Woman, *and* The Virgin and the Dinosaur. *He lives in Mount Vernon, Washington, where he is at work on a fantasy trilogy set during the War of the Roses. His last story for us was the science fiction adventure "A Princess of Helium" last September. This new one may be very different—it's a ghost story set in Twelfth-Century Wales, mingling fictional characters with factual—but as we've come to expect from any story bearing Rod's byline, it's very good reading.*

Strongbow

By R. Garcia y Robertson

"These parts are much given to implacable quarrels and domestic feuds. I leave it to others to tell of the inhuman crimes committed in our own times: marriages most cruelly brought about, inflicted rather than contracted, only to be cut short by savage acts of family bloodshed....

—Gerald of Wales, 1191

Wall Walk

CLARE HAD TO WALK THE walls just to breathe. Looking out at morning mist on hostile Welsh hills, she imagined the smell of death hung over the castle. Clinging to cold stone. Sunk into the straw and rushes strewn on the stone floors. Her stepfather was not yet dead, merely dying, but the smell was already there. As real to Clare as the white mist on the green hills. As real as Strongbow's ghost.

Unloving and aloof, her stepfather had long been physically deaf, and

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utterly blind to her wants and needs. But it shook her to see him lying stricken and speechless, no longer anchoring her world. Pious to a fault, he slept on unwashed sheets and put sharp pebbles in his shoes. When he fell sick, the castle women found that he secretly wore a hair undershirt alive with vermin, knotted so tightly to his waist that the cords dug at his flesh.

If death came for someone so pious and humble, how could anyone be safe?

Clare had sat vigil in the sick chamber half the night, lulled by women's prayers and her stepfather's labored breath. At dawn she got up to walk the walls. No one told her no, or tried to stop her. It felt strange to be suddenly beyond adult control. To be the heiress, and at thirteen the lady of the castle.

"Good morrow, little whore."

Clare looked up to see her stepbrother, looming large in the morning light, dressed in his favorite fur-lined tunic and drawers. Edmund had always been bigger than she. Big, blond, and hateful. He hated her ever since their parents married, and he realized she stood between him and her mother's inheritance. It grated that "this tiny slut, this little worthless creature" could keep him from being lord of Caeradar.

She turned back toward the hills, staring out over Ebbw Vale, muttering a spell that would send Edmund over the seas to be a harem slave among the Turks.

He took her chin between his thumb and finger, twisting her head around, forcing her to face him. "I said, Good morrow, bastard sister."

The magic had not worked. Edmund had an evil strength that foiled even her best spells. He had always been stronger, and able to hurt her. And he gloried in that strength and ability. She might be her mother's heiress — and the family pet — but he could always cause her pain, could casually make her cry.

"Good morrow," she muttered, her chin still held painfully in his grip. As they had gotten older, his desire to hurt her had taken more sinister forms. When she was seven and he was ten, Edmund had pushed her into the mud, then ground his bootheel down on her hand, breaking her finger. But that had been child's play. Now Clare truly feared him, knowing he meant to break not only her body, but her spirit as well.

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"That's better, little bastard." Besides his strength, Edmund liked to hold his legitimacy over her. She might be her mother's heiress, but he was born in wedlock. It made robbing her a moral duty.

He gave her face a gleeful inspection. "I don't know what I will do when Father is dead. Put you in a nunnery perhaps, like your crazy mother. Or maybe marry you to the Welsh dog-boy." He turned her head, forcing her to look into the lower bailey, where Rory was exercising the long loping Welsh greyhounds.

Unable to move her head, she stared at Rory, a red-haired, green-eyed boy about Edmund's age. Remarkably clean-looking, considering he was Welsh, with straight legs and nimble feet, making him a good dancer. His sister Gwen was her serving girl.

Rory must have heard, since he looked up. Somehow he knew they were talking about him, though he did not even speak English, much less Norman-French. But like all Welsh he had that animal knack for knowing without speech. He must not have liked being talked about, because he turned and walked away, taking the hounds with him.

Edmund jerked her head back to face him. "Or perhaps I will just wall you up in some convenient tower, to die of thirst and madness amid your own filth." She saw that idea had a special appeal.

"But whatever I do, we will first have a night to remember. You have that to look forward to." He let his hand drop, turned and walked away, having more important things to do than torment her. He too was scared. Clare could tell. Insulting the Welsh and bullying her were Edmund's two main ways of making himself feel better.

She turned, staring back out over the hayfield dotted with the burnt remains of St. John's Eve bonfires, looking down on fish hawks soaring over the white torrent of the Ebbw. Edmund only had power over her if she let him. Before giving in she would climb to the highest part of the keep and hurl herself from the battlements. Suicide might be a mortal sin — but that was between her and God. It would be her doing. Her decision.

But throwing herself off the keep would do her small good, no matter how much it might disappoint Edmund. She desperately needed a more promising plan, one not requiring her gory demise.

Her fingers dug at cold hard stone. Beyond the Ebbw, green Welsh hills rose and fell, a great timbered sea receding into misty distance. Within the

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walls people walked lightly. The lord of Caeradar lay dying, leaving everyone unsure of their station. But beyond the walls things were no better. All England was in an uncertain state. Indeed, all Christendom lay in disarray. The Lord God Almighty — never unjust, but often not easy to understand — had let the infidel Saladin take Holy Jerusalem. Kings and emperors had gone off on Crusade, along with hordes of lesser folk. Good King Richard Lionheart went with them, leaving behind a hated regent and a treacherous brother who were happily at each other's throats.

No one could know what was coming. Not she. Not Edmund. Not even Prince John, the brother to King Richard. Only the wild Welsh in the surrounding hills knew what to make of it. They had already risen up in revolt.

Witch's Night

CLARE KNELT in the sick chamber, eyes closed, hands clasped, smelling burnt wax, frankincense, and the deathly sweet odor of disease. She could hear the women at their prayers, whispering words over and over again. Her own prayers were varied, but heartfelt. She begged for her stepfather's life. Not just because he had been pious and decent — but out of horror at what Edmund would do. By now she knew which of Edmund's threats were real and which were made just to terrify her. At the absolute best he would brutalize her — in ways he was not allowed to so long as his father lived. Afterward, if she was lucky, he would lock her up in a nunnery to keep her from her inheritance.

Clare knew something of a nun's life from visits to her mother. They had shaved heads and slept on board beds, beneath itchy hair blankets. Bells woke them at Lauds, in the darkest hour of morning. They put on black habits — the same ones they would be buried in — and went to the chapel to pray, stretched out on the cold stones in total submission to Christ, their lord and husband. Then they filed back to their cells for an hour of rest before Prime. Breakfast was bread and water. Dinner not much better. They never knew a man's love, never had children, never enjoyed a free day to do as they pleased. A bleak life at best. But Edmund had the means to make it seem like heaven.

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The Matins bell rang. Clare crossed herself and rose. Women muttering prayers watched her leave. Last spring, she had turned thirteen, and been the castle pet, indulged and doted on by everyone save Edmund. Now her least action had grave meaning. For good or ill, Caeradar's future resided in her body.

She mounted the spiral stairs leading to the top floor of the keep. The heart of Caeradar was the castle's great rectangular Norman keep. Sitting atop a limestone ridge above the river Ebbw, the four-story keep dominated the landscape, dwarfing the little Welsh round towers and hill forts, seeming to have been raised by titans. Her stepfather's sickroom was adjacent to the chapel. Winding stairs led to an anteroom directly above that had been her mother's bedroom, and now belonged to Clare.

She closed and barred the door behind her. This room, the sickroom, and the chapel had become her sanctuary — now that the wall walk was no longer safe.

Night air smelled of lamp black. Curtains covered the arrow slits spaced around three sides of the bedchamber. The stone window seats beneath them were three feet tall, built for a race of giants. Two women waited in her bedchamber, one young, one old — aside from hermits and prisoners, Clare's world had no concept of privacy. Gwen, her Welsh serving girl, slept on the floor at the foot of the canopy bed. Nuala, her big white-haired Irish nurse, sat on an oak chest, head nodding, a shawl around her shoulders. She looked up as the door closed.

"Eat," Nuala ordered. She had brought hare-and-wine collops and honey cakes up from the kitchen. "Then wake the girl."

Selecting a honey cake, Clare sat obediently at the older woman's feet. She might be the lady of the castle, but Nuala would always be her nurse — who had suckled her, spanked her, and cared for her, crooning her to sleep and sharing her bed. "How goes it?" Nuala nodded toward the sickroom below.

"He sinks fast," Clare admitted. She had every reason to wish her stepfather well, but she could not lie to Nuala.

"Mother Mary gives and the Mother Mary takes," Nuala intoned. "Now eat your collops."

Clare obeyed, though she never liked eating rabbits — or anything cute. Once she had freed the castle's entire stock of hares, herding them

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out the upper bailey's high postern, amazing and frightening the Welsh, who had never seen rabbits before. Herd girls and hay cutters fled for the hills, pursued by frisking hares. But the way Nuala cooked them, with wine, onions, and oatmeal, gave them an agreeable nutty taste.

She washed her collops down with wine, then looked toward the bed. "Shall I wake her?"

Nuala nodded. Clare went over and shook the girl lying at the foot of her bed, saying, "Wake up, Gwen. It is time."

Green eyes flicked opened. Gwen sat up, red-haired, freckle-faced, half-asleep, and mumbling in Welsh, "O? Arglwyddes Caer?"

Clare smiled, "Bore da." Meaning, "Good morning." She had taken in Gaelic with Nuala's milk, and Gwen had taught her Welsh. She spoke both languages better than she spoke English, the language of soldiers and serfs. Norman-French was her "native" speech, though she had never been to France, except in spirit. And she knew enough Latin to talk to God in his own tongue. In fact she found many similarities between Welsh and Latin. Words like "tripod" and "tribedd." Or "canis" and "ci." Proof that the Welsh were descended from the Trojan heroes who founded Rome.

The serving girl rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Ydyn ni'n mynd?"

Clare nodded. "Ydyn ni'n mynd." We are going. Locals called Clare "Arglwyddes Caer o Caeradar." Lady Caer of Caeradar. The Rabbit Girl. Caer meant "camp." Or "home." Caeradar meant, "Camp of the birds." Like Caerleon meant "Camp of the Legions."

Gwen and her brother the dog-boy were the last hostages left loose in the castle. Last summer her people had overrun two castles, Laugharne and Llanstephen, three easy days to the east. Now the rising had spread to Ebbw Vale, condemning Gwen to death or disfigurement. The other locals not locked in the keep basement had all gone over the walls, or out the latrine postern, as soon as the hill tribes had risen — taking flitches of bacon, tableware and tapestries, whatever they could lay hands on in lieu of wages. Theft was the Welsh way of saying thanks.

Clare looked over at Nuala. "We're ready. Let's go. I want to see Mother."

Her nurse had already blown out the lamps, leaving a single taper burning in the middle of the floor. Observing a holy silence, Nuala loosed her long single-piece Celtic robe, then pulled her French-cut blouse over

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her head. It was natural and comforting for Clare to see her nurse naked. Nuala was incredibly strong, topping thirteen stone, with wide hips, broad knotted shoulders, and arms like a troll. She had earth-magic in her blood. Not just a lady's nurse, Nuala was a blacksmith, boatwright, and harper — who shoed her own horses, built her own boats, and composed her own verse. Born in the first half of the century, she could still out-row men and run down mares, and remained a fearsome wrestler, having beaten the garrison sergeant-at-arms two falls in three.

Nuala was a force of nature. Clare was always in awe of her, and always depended on her. More so than on her own mother, who had a retiring and contemplative temperament. If Nuala said they must walk across the sea to Spain, or fly naked to the Moon, Clare would not have doubted they could do it.

Clare took off her chamber slippers, then her loose-sleeved gown and the chemise underneath. Gwen removed her homespun cloak and dress, singing softly to herself as she stripped. She had been included to complete the coven, and as hostage she had little choice. Nuala was not someone you said "no" to.

They knelt facing each other, forming a naked triangle around the lighted candle. Nuala smeared honey in the girls' mouths, and they linked hands. Tall shadows danced about the chamber. The Matins bell had rung, making it past midnight on Friday, Witch's Night.

Nuala invoked Mary — Virgin, All Mother, and Death Angel — the female trinity. Then she began an ancient Irish chant, one she used to croon to Clare in her cradle, as soft and compelling as the rolling sea. Flickering candlelight, the rising and falling rhythm, the taste of honey, all drew Clare in. Cares fell away. Her eyes closed. She let herself drift away on Nuala's song. The world around her disappeared.

Waiting in the darkness behind her eyelids was her spirit guide. Maid Marian. Mary as maiden, young and blonde, as ripe and wild as the greenwood. Dressed in a forest-colored tunic and hose, she had a huntsman's cap and horn, and carried a bow. The mannish garb showed she defied men's laws and assumed their prerogatives, unfettered by dresses and convention. Her bow symbolized her power over life and death. Her cap and horn meant she hunted for souls.

She asked, "Why have you come, dear daughter?"

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"I have come to see my mother," Clare whispered back.

"And so you have," Marian spun about and spread her arms.

"My Earthly mother," Clare explained.

Maid Marian smiled, showing sly dimples, looking as merry and roguish as the outlaws who worshipped her. "I knew that."

In a twinkling Clare found herself standing in a narrow stone cell furnished with a plain oak chair and table. A woman slept on the low bed. The only decoration was a little picture of the Virgin on the wall, lighted by wax candles. Clare knew at once she was at Fontevrault Abbey on the banks of the Vienne, near Chion. The woman sleeping on the bed was her mother.

Marian admired her likeness on the wall, while Clare stared down at her sleeping mother, envious of her serenity and shining chestnut hair. She always felt plain compared to her mother. Mother had been the great lady, mistress to an earl, a damsel for poets to sing of. Clare was the little cast-off bastard, an inconvenience to everyone.

She also envied her mother's security, sleeping peacefully in this tight stone cell. Fontevrault was an utterly amazing place in a world otherwise ruled by men. Here the monks and lay brothers were completely subject to the Abbess, who by law had to be a widowed nun — both chaste and maternal, and accustomed to managing a household. Under women's rule Fontevrault had become a refuge for battered wives, poor widows, prostitutes, discarded mistresses, incest victims, outcast concubines, and surplus princesses who could not find suitable marriages.

Mother was none of these. Her husband, now dying, had been hopelessly devoted to her. She was neither battered, nor sick, nor outcast. She was not a nun, nor even a lay sister. But she was beautiful, charmingly willful, and adept at landing on her feet. She had found the one place in Christendom where no man's hand could reach her.

Clare called out, "Mother." The sleeping form stirred. Clare tried again. "Mother."

Her mother sat up, looking astonished, muttering, "Holy Mary!"

Marian smiled and curtsied.

Brushing shining brown hair out of her eyes, her mother stared at the two young women — one naked, the other dressed up like Robin Hood. "Clare, is that you?"

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"It is me, mother."

"Am I dreaming?" She looked about for something to prick herself with.

"No. You are not dreaming."

Her mother sat back. "Then it must be Friday."

"Yes, it's Friday. You ought to have been expecting me." This was not Clare's first witch's flight to Fontevrault.

Solemnly her mother got up and knelt in bed, managing to make it look graceful. She crossed herself, then thanked Marian "for bringing my daughter to me." Marian nodded, casually acknowledging the miracle.

Turning back to her daughter, she asked, "And how is Nuala?"

"Nuala is fine. It was she who sent me." Put off by pleasantries, Clare went straight to the purpose of the midnight visit. "You must know Stepfather is dying."

"I am sorry for that. But if incessant prayers and a hair shirt cannot save him, what can I do?"

"And Edmund...."

"Edmund is dying too?" Her mother looked hopeful.

"No. Edmund is a monster, and very much alive." It angered Clare that her mother instantly tried to wish away every problem. Mother sank back, looking from her to Marian, who wore an expression of virginal innocence, as if to say that Edmund was an Earthly issue. "What am I going to do?" Clare demanded. "He means to rape and murder me." Clare wanted to fight him, but did not have the means. She was not Nuala, and could not resist Edmund physically. She had come with the wild notion that she might pry her mother out of Fontevrault, getting her to come to Wales. Edmund was her stepson. Caeradar was her castle. Clearly that was not going to happen. Clare felt like a caterpillar crushed beneath a rock.

Her mother sighed, "It is your father's fault."

"For dying?"

"No. I mean your real father. He saddled me with that castle."

Clare's real father was Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, known as Strongbow, the fabled adventurer who brought Norman rule to Ireland. The Earl and her mother had never been married, which made Clare a bastard, despite her famous name. The earldom of Pembroke, and the great Clare estates in England, Ireland, and Wales had gone

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to Strongbow's legitimate daughter, Isabel de Clare, the damsel of Estriguil, who married William the Marshal — "Good, courteous, beautiful, and wise" according to the troubadours. Clare and her mother got only the manor of Caeradar on the wild fringes of Glamorgan.

"I never wanted to be tied to some tiresome border castle, with naught but the Welsh for neighbors...."

Clare said nothing. No one had given her a choice. Caeradar was all she had ever known.

"I wish your father were here, to see the mess he has made."

"Beware what you wish for." Maid Marian snapped her thumb and a red-haired Norman knight appeared wearing a chain-mail hauberk with long sleeves, and a mail coif topped by a conical steel cap. He looked a bit out of fashion with his bare mail and pointed helmet — surcoats and flat helms having just come into style — but was still suitably impressive, with a big Welsh longbow across his back and the three de Clare chevrons on his shield. He had broad shoulders and bowman's arms, reaching all the way to his knees.

Clare saw at once why she so little resembled her mother. Never having seen her father, she had spent hours pouring over old marginal illuminations, trying to know his face, though the pictures were often tiny and in manuscripts dated long after his death. Hair and eyes were as she had imagined. But all those illustrations — even his stone effigies in the cathedrals — had not captured how much his living face resembled hers. His features were fine and delicate, almost womanish. Brows and chin, and the arch of his nose were hers writ large.

She stared in amazement. Until this moment her world had been defined by her father's absence — in life and in name. Raised by a man who was not her father. Matched against a boy who was not her brother. With no male protector, in a world where men did as they pleased. She was not just illegitimate, but a posthumous bastard to boot. "The most useless thing imaginable," as Edmund liked to remind her.

Strongbow bowed politely to her mother, "You wished for me, my Lady." His voice too was hers, pitched like woman's, soft and courteous.

Mother sniffed, in no mood to be mollified. "I am no longer anyone's Lady, thank goodness."

Strongbow smirked, "You seemed eager enough at the time."

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"I wanted to be your wife."

He spread his hands in apology. "Alas, that was not possible."

"You married that heathen tart fast enough." Mother never used Eva's name — as if Clare could somehow not know it.

"Only for reasons of state." The ghost shrugged armored shoulders. "I was destitute, and Dermot McMurrough of Leinster offered a kingdom."

It already pained Clare to see her parents fight. Mother leaned back against the wall of her cell, arms folded. "And now you are dead and useless."

"Believe me, that was never my plan."

"A thin excuse for leaving your daughter in desperate straits." She nodded at Clare.

"My daughter?" Strongbow turned to stare, making Clare uncomfortably aware of her nudity. "This is the child you were carrying?"

"Of course. She is why I called you here." Mother deftly appropriated Marian's miracle.

"What is her name?" He seemed truly taken aback, suddenly confronted with his grown child. Clare saw that while she had known about him all her life, her father had no forewarning — so much for the dead knowing everything.

"I called her Clare."

"She's beautiful." He was complimenting his own features, but it came from the heart. Clare had been called a million things, from "little clot of dung" to "Caer of Caeradar, the Rabbit Girl." Never had she imagined this was the first thing her true father would say on seeing her. In a single stroke, Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, the conqueror of Dublin, Waterford, Wexford, and Leinster, had won over his daughter. She had prayed for some male protector, some Saint George or Sir Galahad in shining armor, never expecting it would be her dead father.

Turning about, he knelt before her mother, his gloved hand raised. "In the divine presence of Mary Mother of God, I promise to do all I can for our daughter. Whatever powers I have left, whatever gifts God may grant, I put them in her service."

Mother snorted as if she had heard this all before, motioning Clare to her side. Clare carefully stepped around her kneeling father — though they were both immaterial. "Do not fall for him," Mother warned. "He

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promised me the world, and could not deliver Ireland. I ended up destitute and alone at Caeradar, forced to marry your stepfather just to have a man at my side." She gave Strongbow a hard look. "I know he looks as fair as he talks, but had he left us a decent living, instead of some wild Welsh manor, all would be different."

Turning back to Clare, her voice softened. "Heaven knows, I have done you no better. I wish I had you here in these cloisters. I would have taken you with me, but your stepfather refused to let both of us go. And I could not abide a man who brings lice into bed." If only one of them could escape, Mother made sure it was her — Clare thought it, but did not say it.

"I am sorry I could not do more. When your stepfather dies, I will take a nun's vows. But you are the heiress of Caeradar, which makes you a prisoner of the world." Witch's Night was not over, but Mother had plainly had enough. Before the Lauds bell rang, Maid Marian whisked Clare back to the Camp of the Birds.

Besieged

RETURNING TO the room that had been her mother's, Clare dressed in holy silence beside a sputtering puddle left by the burnt candle. She went back down to the sickroom when the Lauds bell rang in the chapel. Afterward Nuala's strong hands tucked her in. "I saw Mother," Clare whispered. "And Father."

"I know," Nuala told her, pulling the coverlet over them. Clare snuggled up to the bigger woman. Had Nuala been there in spirit? Her nurse never talked about witches' flights, for fear of harming the spell.

And what about Gwen, asleep at the foot of the bed? What sort of Witch's Night did the Welsh girl have? All Gwen ever said in the mornings was that she had sore feet, "O y ddawns neithiwr" — "From the dancing last night." Despite living under a deferred death sentence, Gwen remained unfailingly cheerful, always making the most of the moment. Another Welsh habit that was hard to break.

Clare was up again at Prime to pray. Her stepfather continued to sink. He had not spoken, or taken solid food for a week. Women spooned soup into him, but that could keep him alive only so long. Clare thought of

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Edmund's threat to wall her up without food, or water, or air. He had done half that already, making her a virtual prisoner, confined to the sickroom, the chapel, and her room above. Living under sentence, like Gwen.

She missed the freedom of walking through sunlit woods. Of having the rabbits she loosed on the Welsh come up to eat from her hand. Or of standing on the wall walk feeling the breeze blow, knowing she had it in her to fly beyond the far horizon. What could her father's ghost do to free her? To disbelieve in magic was as unthinkable as denying religion — it flew in the face of all reason and experience. But she was scared enough to fear her witch's flight had been some weird waking dream. Lulling her into doing nothing, while fate closed in.

On Monday Clare awoke in dark morning, aroused by a low moaning. The Lauds bell had rung, sending Nuala to stand vigil in the sickroom. Clare sat up in bed. Moaning grew into fevered groans, then a sharp panting coming from Gwen. Clare could hear the Welsh girl thrashing at the foot of the bed. She listened, horridly fascinated, fearing Gwen might be sick, then realizing her serving girl was having far too good a time. Giggling and crying out, Gwen used Welsh words she had never taught to Clare.

Lying back, Clare had a hard time getting to sleep. At Prime she got up to pray. Her maid lay sprawled on the floor, bedclothes in disarray, strands of red hair plastered to her face with sweat. A dark fertile odor filled the room. When Clare returned from the chapel, she found Gwen going about her tasks with a guilty look.

By then Clare had other concerns. Armed men came riding up the Ebbw. From the roof of the keep, she recognized Bishop William of Llandaff with his personal retainers, plus a small escort of men-at-arms and a dozen mounted spearmen. Bishop William Saltmarsh was a good, pious, not very bright churchman — which might be why the Welsh let him through unmolested.

She entertained these visitors in the great hall on the third floor of the keep, the principal floor, with its middle wall replaced by massive columns. Wider windows, and the huge central light well, made the hall relatively airy, despite being enclosed by ten feet of stone. Edmund stood in for his father, and Clare for her mother. She wore a bright yellow tunic, topped by a damask surcoat and sable mantle, for the first time in days

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daring to share the same room with Edmund — fairly sure he would not assault her before Bishop William and a brace of priests.

Bishop William explained that three nights running the Holy Virgin had appeared to him in a dream, beseeching him to bring the pious and ailing Lord of Caeradar to Llandaff. Either to recover, or be buried beneath the church altar. A surprising request that could hardly be refused. Pack animals were loaded with sumpter-saddles, and a horse-litter prepared. They had to leave at once, since the Lord of Caeradar did not look likely to last the night. Edmund would go with his father, taking half the castle garrison. He was welcome to take them all, so long as he went. Clare feared him more than all the Welsh in the hills.

Before taking Edmund away, Bishop William insisted on a private word with her. Bubbling inside, she did her best to look serious. Good old William Saltmarsh seemed near to death himself, and was forever taking her aside for a few encouraging words, saying, "Remember, child, thou art but a sinful little soul, bearing up a corpse." Or something equally helpful. He had been a simple Bristol Abbot before his consecration, and barely spoke a word of Welsh. Which must have made him a puzzle to his parishioners, striving so earnestly in French and Latin to save their heathen souls.

"My child," he told her, "this only concerns you. The Holy Virgin did not appear to me alone. All three times your father's spirit was with her. Your true father, Earl Richard de Clare."

Bishop William prattled on about how this was a lesson for everyone, the dead earl showing concern for his mistress's husband. Atoning in part for his many sins of the flesh. Clare barely listened — being a prime result of that sinning, she never held it against her father. Instead she thanked his ghost with all her heart for helping get Edmund out of Caeradar. It was up to her to somehow keep him out.

Edmund and the Bishop set off, bearing Lord William in the horse-litter. Clare watched from atop the gatehouse. When word came back from Llandaff that her stepfather had died, she would seize the castle and bar the door to Edmund, accusing him of treason. Of conspiring with the Welsh. Anything to keep him out. At the same time she would appeal to her feudal superiors. Even to Prince John if need be.

But first she just meant to be free of the walls. She had hardly left the

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keep since her stepfather fell ill, and had not been outside the baileys since St. John's Eve.

Telling Nuala, "Pack some food," she changed her pearl-stitched gloves and damask gown for a simple tunic and surcoat. She did not bother with boots, wanting to feel the green hay underfoot. Taking only a single mounted sergeant, she told Rory to turn out the pack. He and Gwen were supposed to be kept under lock and key, but if they meant to run off they would have done it by now. Going out the main gate, with her dogs, her nurse, her horse sergeant, and her pair of young Welsh prisoners — she felt at last like the lady of Caeradar.

The slope down to the river had black patches burnt in it from St. John's Eve bonfires. On that shortest night of the year, castle boys brandished torches to scare off dragons and rolled burning wheels down to the river, symbolizing the sun's turn toward winter. Now it was Clare's turn to spin circles in the sunlight, glorying in her newfound freedom.

When she was done making herself dizzy, she had Gwen spread out the food Nuala had brought, oat bread, cheeses, salt fish, boiled meats, cider and almonds. Rory exercised the hounds. They were Welsh greyhounds, so silent and graceful they barely seemed like dogs, more like magical creatures, aloof and curious.

Clare decided to exercise her new power, asking Gwen, "What did you dream last night?" She meant to allow no mysteries from the Lady of Caeradar.

Gwen's guilty look returned. She whispered in Welsh, "It was that sort of dream."

"What sort?"

"The wrong sort." No wonder she had awakened looking sheepish and smelling of sex.

"Really?" Clare arched an eyebrow, surprised to find Gwen so flustered. Incubi were common in Wales, and Christian ways barely applied to the Welsh, who reveled in incest and premarital relations.

"O, the dream was a delight. But such visits are a sign of strife to come." A safe enough prediction with the hill clans already in arms. "And all the more so because of the man."

"What sort of man was he?" Clare never had night visitors, neither in spirit nor in the flesh, making her curious.

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"Your sort. A Saxon knight." To the Welsh they were all Saxons. Clare had been born in Ireland, to Franco-Norman parents, but she was still a "Saxon."

"Really your sort," Gwen emphasized. "With long deft arms, and a big strong bow across his back."

"And chevrons on his shield?" Clare made the sign in the air, and Gwen nodded. Her hostage maid servant had seen enough foreign heraldry to know whose spirit had lifted her night dress.

Clare sat back, stunned. She pictured her father's ghost, kneeling in the cell at Fontevrault, making chivalrous vows to her mother, with the Holy Virgin looking on. Bastards know their fathers are not chaste, else how did they get to be bastards? But galloping Welsh serving girls on the floor went a bit far. In her mother's chamber. With Clare listening on the bed. Not the sort of spiritual support she had counted on.

And a sign of strife to come. A shiver crept down her spine. She glanced toward the castle. A gust of wind at the gate made the tall grass bow and bend. Slowly the line of nodding grass tops grew longer, heading down toward the river. Rising to her feet, she heard a mournful groaning on the wind, like pipes played low and solemn. Bells tolled over the hills to the south. Greyhounds lifted their heads and howled.

Rory made no attempt to silence the hounds. He stood staring uphill toward the castle, watching the nodding line of grass continue its slow march toward the Ebbw. Nuala crossed herself, making the sign that wards off the evil eye.

"A faerie funeral." Gwen looked serious, no longer shy or ashamed. "The Little Folk are preparing to receive a soul."

Rory turned to them, saying, "Someone will die. And soon."

No need to ask who. The line of bowing grass began at the gate Clare's stepfather had left through, and the tolling bells came from the direction of Llandaff — where he had been headed.

And the Little Folk never lied. No one could live in Wales without knowing about the Little Folk, who lived underground, never ate meat, rode horses the size of greyhounds, and spirited off children to a land of play and pleasure. They were fair and long-haired, and detested surface folk's pretenses and lies. Whatever they promised would come to pass.

Determined not to waste the faeries' warning, Clare ordered Rory to

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call in the dogs, signaling to Nuala and the sergeant that they were returning to Caeradar. As they scrambled back up the hill toward the gate, she heard Gwen gasp. The serving girl grabbed at her arm and pointed downhill.

Clare saw a second slow line cutting through the field of grass, right behind the first one and a little to the side. Someone besides her stepfather was about to die. Clare pulled Gwen toward the gate. They could not stop to guess at who that second funeral might be for; Clare had to get her castle into a state of defense.

She never got her chance. As they reached the gatehouse a voice called down in English, "Riders a-coming."

"Bar the gate," Clare ordered, out of breath from her run up the hill. Men obeyed. She turned to her mounted sergeant. "Bar all the gates. And turn out the bowmen."

Her sergeant pounded off to summon the bowmen and see to the lesser posterns. A soft familiar voice in her head whispered, "That's the spirit."

Clare shot up the gatehouse stairs, with Nuala and Gwen a half step behind her. Rory could be trusted to kennel his pack. He had a habit of treating the hounds as his, keeping him from having to hear obvious orders — but earning him blows for insolence, and for not acting as a proper hostage.

From the gatehouse tower Clare could see far down the green Vale. Woods covered the hills at either hand, broken by silver patches of river. A wagon track wound down the east bank, to connect with the bridge at Newport. She saw horsemen cantering up the track, entering the cleared space before the gate. With Edmund in the lead.

He drew rein at the closed gate, demanding entrance. "Let me in. The Welsh ambushed us. Father and the bishop are taken."

Clare could believe it. Their horses looked blown. One man sat bent over his blood-spattered mount, barely holding on. Saddles and armor were feathered with Welsh arrows. She called down, "Go away."

Edmund stared up in absolute disbelief. After years of bullying her, and plotting to put her away, he seemed utterly astonished that Clare dared deny him anything. As soon as his father fell to the Welsh, he had counted Caeradar as his.

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Welsh bowmen came stumbling up the steps, stringing their six-foot bows. A half-dozen of them formed part of the permanent garrison. Coming from Gwent, they had no kin among the local hill clans, and could be semi-trusted in a crisis.

Edmund shouted up from below, "Open the gate, you silly strumpet."

The soft voice in her head said, "Daughter, have him dismount and approach alone." Clare glanced about. The Welsh waited silently, spaced along the wall, arrows nocked and bows bent. Her father repeated himself, "Tell him to come forward, alone and on foot."

"Why?" she whispered, trying not to be seen talking to the air.

"So the archers can get a clear shot."

She stared down at Edmund. The Welsh bowmen would do it. They were glad to see the men below were Saxons, who could be punctured without setting Gwent and Glamorgan at feud. Edmund did not even deign to speak their language.

"Do it," Strongbow commanded. "It is your life or his."

Clutching the stone, Clare leaned forward, remembering her visit to Abergavenny Castle — site of the infamous massacre, where the Sheriff of Hereford murdered his Welsh guests, and the men of Gwent had gone to get revenge. She had seen the points of Welsh arrows protruding from a gate door as thick as her hand. She called down to Edmund, "Go away, or I'll shoot."

"No," Strongbow ordered. "Come forward."

"Begone," Clare shouted. She could not bring herself to kill in cold blood. "Begone, or I'll shoot."

"Idiot whore," he shouted back. "You would not dare."

That's what you think. She turned to the archers, saying in Welsh, "Shoot."

They shot. Arrows rained down on the disbelieving men below. Horses reared. Saddles fell empty. One man and mount spun in circles, an arrow passing through two folds of armor, the man's thigh, and the horse's saddle, had pinned the rider to the terrified animal's flank. But the man Clare wanted to see dead was not so much as scratched. Edmund wheeled his mount and raced away from the gate without an arrow coming near him.

"That was foolish," her father informed her. Not just foolish but fatal. Clare saw Edmund heading for the latrine portal on the far side of the lower

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bailey. Shouting for the Welsh to follow, she ran along the wall walk to head him off.

Though she had the shorter distance, his horse beat her to the postern, a narrow door in the bailey wall used to service the kitchens and latrines. Two mural towers, and the keep itself, overlooked the little gate which led into the lower bailey. Edmund dismounted. She could hear him pounding on the door, shouting that the Welsh had turned on them, saying, "Let me in. The Welsh are coming. His lordship and the bishop are taken."

Of course they let him in. With his father gone, the men below were bound to obey him. Who else could hold Caeradar against the Welsh?

Telling Gwen and Nuala to follow her, she leaped down onto the kitchen roof. No direct doors led from the wall walk to the keep — so even if the outer baileys fell, the great tower would be unbreached. But Clare had grown up in the castle, and knew every shortcut from one part to the next. She left her Welsh archers on the wall walk, seeing no sense dragging them into a doomed struggle with the Saxon garrison. Jumping off the low kitchen roof, she raced across the bailey, beating Edmund to the main door of the keep. Bounding up the stone steps to the second floor entrance, with Gwen and Nuala at her heels, she ordered the door barred behind them.

At best that bought time. Edmund had more than half the garrison with him in the lower bailey, not to mention the kitchens and latrines. If she tried to hold the keep against him, someone would surely let him in. Father had been right; only Edmund's death could have saved her.

She led Nuala and Gwen straight through the keep and out the north door into the upper bailey. Bursting from shadowy stone back into bright sunlight, she shouted in Welsh for Rory. "Bring the hounds to the upper postern." Seeing him emerge from the kennels with the pack, she ordered surprised guards to throw open the gate.

A narrow slice of rolling green Vale showed through the gap in the stonework, grassy slopes blended with wooded ridgelines fading into unbounded distance. Clare could feel the breeze blowing beyond the walls. It was the same gate where she released the rabbits.

"Go! Quickly!" she told her hostages in Welsh. "Ewch! Cyflym!" Rory did not stop to wonder. Saxon guards stared in astonishment as the dog-boy bolted out the postern and down the slope, followed by his hounds.

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Gwen looked pained. She wavered in the gate, turning to give Clare a swift embrace. For years they had been playmates and private confidants, sometimes mistress and servant, ofttimes pupil and teacher, but always each other's only same-age companion. Sisters are seldom so close. "Go," Clare warned. "It will mean your life if you stay." Gwen kissed her, then picked up her skirts and ran.

Clare watched them vanish, feeling terribly alone, with no one to trust — except for Nuala, who had been with her since birth. Telling her guards to close the high postern, she turned back toward the keep, very much a prisoner of the world.

As soon as she entered the shadow of the keep, she could hear Edmund shouting for the Welsh hostages to be brought up from the basement guardroom. It must have taken him all of a minute to convince the guards to open the main door for him.

Clare mounted the stone stairs, with Nuala at her side. Each step felt blunt and heavy underfoot. Her whole mismanaged life seemed aimed at this awful moment. Born a fatherless bastard. Abandoned by her mother. Her stepfather dead. Edmund was all the family she had left. And now she faced the fate he had been holding over her since they were children.

As she gained the second floor entrance, Edmund was storming about, ordering the Welsh hostages herded out the far door of the keep. Most of them were sons and nephews of local headmen and clan chiefs. Guards drove them at spearpoint down the steps into the lower bailey. Edmund glanced about. His gaze swept over her. Then he strode out into the sunlit bailey after his prisoners — without saying a word, without even pausing to gloat. Which almost seemed worse than a blow. Edmund clearly counted her as already his. A detail to be disposed of at leisure — of less consequence than his cowering Welsh prisoners.

She mounted the spiral stairs to the roof, with Nuala following close behind, keeping guard over her nursling. Skirting the rain water fishpond, and the great gaping lightwell, Clare ran to the south wall. From there she could see Edmund on the far side of the bailey, lining his hostages up along the gatehouse battlements. Leaning out an embrasure he began to harangue the silent countryside — largely in French. After living most of his life at Caeradar, he only knew enough Welsh to curse.

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He got no answer. Empty air and green countryside did not give back even an echo. But no one doubted the Welsh were out there, keeping a sharp eye on Caeradar. Nothing happened hereabouts without the Welsh knowing it.

When he finished his speech, Edmund turned to his prisoners. Clare watched horrified as he went down the line of hostages, picking victims at random. She could see he enjoyed having life or death power over his captives. Each hostage Edmund picked had his ankles tied together with a length of rope, then guards hoisted him up onto the battlements. After another barrage of insults, Edmund or his sergeant-at-arms would draw a knife across the prisoner's belly, spilling out his intestines. Then they would heave him off the wall, to hang head down from the outer battlements, so the Welsh outside could see him die.

Some of the younger ones kicked and struggled, but most went stoically to their deaths, with only Edmund's curses breaking the terrible silence. Clare had often seen the Welsh suffer gruesome injuries without so much as a whimper, though they could be appallingly loud at weddings and funerals. Clearly these hostages expected no pity from a Saxon.

When he was done, Edmund promised the mute countryside more of the same if anyone dared defy him. Then he stormed back across the bailey and into the keep, blood staining his hands. Clare cursed herself for not killing him when she had the chance. Her whole world seemed drowned in blood. Edmund was running amok, and now it would be war to the knife with the Welsh.

Mailed feet rang on the steps. She turned to see the sergeant-at-arms emerge onto the roof. He too had blood on his leather gloves. Less than an hour ago, he had been at her beck and call, now he would not meet her gaze. "Lord Edmund wishes to see his sister."

Clare gave him a cold look. "And who would these people be?" To her Edmund was lord of nothing, and hardly a brother.

"Please don't make this hard, m'lady," the sergeant mumbled. He said it to her, but he was watching out for Nuala. The big Irish nurse had stepped forward, planting herself between Clare and the man-at-arms.

Clare did not mean to take orders from a mere sergeant. She would die first — this was the roof she had aimed to throw herself off of. She told the man, "I am heiress to Caeradar, and keeper of the castle in my mother's

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name. Obey me or suffer the consequences." Clare could not say what those consequences were, but she hoped they would be dire.

Giving Nuala an uneasy glance, he held out a bloodstained glove. "Please come, m'lady."

Clare stood her ground. If she let this man lay hands on her there would be no end to giving in. He stepped closer, meaning to take her whether she willed it or not. Nuala sprang at the armored sergeant, seizing him about the waist, lifting him off his feet. She shouted to Clare, "Run, my love. Seek sanctuary in the chapel."

Instinctively she obeyed. Ducking past the sergeant — now struggling in her nursemaid's embrace — she dived down the spiral stairs, taking them two at a time. The dark stones of the keep closed around her, shutting out the shouts from above.

At the fourth floor landing, she stopped. The chapel lay just below her, on the main floor of the keep. But it was just a castle chapel, not a true sanctuary like Fontevrault. Edmund would come for her even if she clung crying to the altar.

She looked wildly about the upper hall, empty at the moment. Sunlight spilled out of tall window slits, and shone down the huge central light shaft. What was the use in running? Nowhere could she be truly safe.

A man's horrified scream echoed off the stones. Clare stared in terror as Nuala plunged through the lightwell in the ceiling, her big cloak flapping like bat's wings. The sergeant, still locked in her grip, clawed the air as they fell. Together they shot through the hall and disappeared down the light shaft, headed for the deep basement cistern four floors below.

Clare screamed too. Turning about, she ran for her mother's chamber, barring the oak door behind her. Tears blurred her view of the big stone bedchamber. She had meant to make a fight of it — to at least die with dignity. But whatever happened she had expected to have Nuala at her side. Now the big strong woman who nursed her, rocked her, and taught her witchcraft was gone. Ripped from her when she needed her most.

Someone pounded on the door at her back, demanding that she open it. The violence of the blows startled her out of her misery. Other than that door, there was no way in or out. She was in a stone box. Narrow arrow slits spaced along three of its walls showed thin slices of Welsh countryside. Called "murderesses," the slits were too narrow to climb through, and

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three stories off the ground. The pounding grew louder. She recognized Edmund's voice. "Open the door, you silly little fool."

She did not answer, thinking of the Welsh children hanging from the wall. Edmund might be right, maybe she had been a silly fool to think she could defy him, but she knew it was death to open that door.

"By God, I'll have you flayed and boiled."

That was a new one. Clare leaned back against the door. A basin and pitcher by the bed held water. Bread and wine sat on the table beside a bowl of fruit. If she had known she had to stand a siege, she would have stocked the place better.

The pounding ceased. She could hear Edmund giving orders on the far side of the door. The pounding became a great banging. They were trying to batter the door in, probably with one of the benches from the upper hall. But the door was brass-bound oak, and the bar was iron, set directly into stone. She heard the bench splinter, followed by more cursing.

"Bring axes," Edmund ordered. They were going to cut their way in. Then what? Clare knew she could not hold out forever. What would she do when the door came down? A broad saxe knife lay on the table beside the wine. She went over and sat down next to it. The knife was big and ugly, but the blade was sharp. She had used it at breakfast to cut bread. Crazed with grief, she stared down at the sharply honed blade. Who could she use it on? Edmund? She had missed her chance to kill him. Herself? He would get a good laugh at that. If only Nuala were with her.

Reaching out, she poured herself some wine. It was not the best, dark and fruity, barely fermented. But at least it was not bitter. There was grit in the bottom of the cup. A pinch of Irish soil, put there by Nuala to ward off poison.

Steel rang against wood. They had gotten the axes. She heard the door start to splinter. In a matter of minutes they would be in. Oh, Mary help me. She gulped more wine.

"Don't despair." The voice sounded so beautifully light and matter-of-fact, it seemed for a moment Mary had answered. She turned to see her father's ghost at the far end of the room, long arms folded, leaning against the stone wall. Like at Fontevrault, he was in full armor, with his big bow across his back.

The ghost wore a mischievous grin. "You must have heard minstrels

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sing of the time I was besieged in Dublin Castle. Caught between High King Roderic O'Connor — who raised 30,000 clansmen from all across the island — and King Guthred of Man, who sat in the bay with a Viking fleet. I had but six score knights and a few hundred archers. Food became so dear a measure of flour sold for a silver mark. I would have given in myself, but King Roderic swore that I could only keep Dublin, Waterford, and Wexford, and not a foot more...."

"I don't have six score knights," she shouted at him. "Or so much as a single archer." It was easy for him to be brave. He was dead already.

"And Edmund is not Roderic O'Connor," he reminded her cheerfully. "Or even Guthred of Man. But the principle's the same. Never despair. Face your enemies with a bold front, and you can send them packing."

A big hunk of the door burst inward. Clare looked up and saw a steel ax blade protruding from the wood. The blade withdrew, then came crashing back, sending splinters flying across the room. The door sagged. She seized the heavy saxe knife, putting it behind her back — still unsure how she meant to use it. More splinters shot into the room. She glanced hopelessly at her long-dead father.

The ghost smirked. "In the end, I sent King Roderic running naked from his bath. A sight to see. And we lost no one of note. Naught but a single sergeant."

God, she thought, Mother was right. He's mad. Utterly mad, and having a grand time of it. Reliving old glories. Visiting the bishop in his sleep. Tupping the Welsh chamber maid. But what has he done for me? No one was standing up for her — except Nuala, and she had died for it.

The door gave way, splitting in the middle. A mailed hand reached in and slid the bar aside. Strongbow's ghost vanished.

Clare stood facing the doorway. Her hand tightened on the saxe knife behind her back. A bold front it had to be. She pictured herself driving the blade into Edmund's throat.

The shattered door swung wide. Instead of Edmund she saw old Bishop William Saltmarsh of Llandaff, blinking like an owl in daylight. She had thought the Welsh had him, but here he was, looking more bemused than ever framed by the broken doorway.

"My daughter," he croaked, "you must come out. The Welsh are at the gate. They have Lord William."

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"Lord William alive?" A wondrous reprieve. So long as her stepfather lived, Edmund could not be lord of Caeradar.

"Barely. I have been released on parole to arrange an exchange."

"An exchange?"

The bishop nodded, still dithering in the doorway. "I am afraid they won't give up Lord William until they get what they want."

"What do they want?" Whatever it was, she would give it — short of surrendering Caeradar itself. She thought immediately of the surviving hostages. Luckily Edmund had left some few alive. Their freedom would be a trivial price to pay for getting her stepfather back.

Seeing no alternative, old Bishop Saltmarsh summoned the courage to speak plainly. "My daughter, I fear what they want is you."

> "The Welsh are vindictive by nature, bloodthirsty and violent, avenging with great ferocity any wrong done them. Not just recent injuries, but old ones too, as if they were just received."
>
> — Gerald of Wales

Prisoner of the World

CLARE FOUND Edmund ecstatic. When Bishop Saltmarsh brought her down to the great hall, her stepbrother greeted her gleefully, "Sister dear, how good to finally see you. I hear you had trouble with your door. We must have it replaced."

Any reply only added to his triumph. Edmund had won. He had Caeradar. And she would end up in the hands of the Welsh — to do with as they pleased. And with the bodies of their children hanging from the walls, what they pleased was bound to be unpleasant. The Welsh were thoughtlessly cruel, utterly unrestrained by chivalry, especially toward a "Saxon." Perjury, theft, rape, fratricide, adultery and incest were so common they were hardly counted crimes. Neither God's laws nor sworn oaths stood in the way of their vengeance.

She merely insisted on changing to her best riding dress, royal blue trimmed with miniver, topped by a satin cape pinned with a pearl broach

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— the Welsh had to know they were getting a lady. When she opened the clothes chest she nearly wept. Folded in with the dress was the tiny feathered body of a black and white kingfisher. Nuala had put the dead bird there, to impart a pleasant odor and keep the wool safe from moths.

Edmund had a palfrey saddled, personally escorting her to the main gate. The Welsh were under the trees on the far side of the cleared space around the castle, dressed in linen war shirts and armed with spears, bows, and iron darts. Wild faces grinned above their round shields.

Edmund gave her palfrey a slap on the rump, saying, "I hope they send you back in pieces."

Emerging from the black shadow of the bloodstained gatehouse into the sun-drenched clearing, she felt like she was being sent out to sea in a bottomless boat, with old Bishop Saltmarsh at the tiller. The Welsh started Lord William's horse-litter from the edge of the wood, led by an old woman, barefoot and dressed in black, her white unbound hair hanging straight down. They met in the middle. Bishop Saltmarsh gave the palfrey's reins to the Welsh woman, taking charge of the horse-litter.

Clare peered under the litter's awning to see how her stepfather fared. Immediately she pulled back, muttering a prayer and crossing herself, seeing why the Welsh had sent a crone in black to give him to a priest. She was being exchanged for a corpse. Summer sunlight seemed to flicker. Sitting on her horse, halfway between the dark gatehouse and the black space beneath the trees, she heard Strongbow's voice. "These Welsh are looking to get a lady. Don't let them see you cry."

What did he know? In life he did as he pleased, and now he was beyond grief. She nodded to the woman in black, saying, "Ewch!" Meaning, "Go!" Having no choice, she could at least pretend to command. She still had the saxe knife hidden in her bodice. If she was brave, the best they could do was kill her. If she showed fear there would be no end to their impositions.

"That's the spirit," whispered her father's ghost.

At the trees, cheering Welsh closed in around her, waving bows and spears, behaving like big bearded children with edged weapons. Shouting greetings in barnyard Welsh, they called her "Rabbit Girl" and the like. If the merry bandits meant to kill her, they would have a happy time of it. Just when she thought they would pluck her off the palfrey, Gwen pushed through the pack, saying, "Caer, Caer, it is so good to have you here."

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Clare managed a wan smile. Her former maid-servant took the reins, leading her into the woods, prattling on about how wonderful it all was, "How exciting to be home." Rory was there, walking single file with the men. Elms and beeches closed in, cutting her off from Caeradar. Looking over her shoulder, she could not even see the keep through the treetops.

Woods ahead got ever wilder. The path beneath her palfrey's hooves thinned and narrowed, turning into a game trail. She did not dare ask where they were going — whatever answers they gave were equally unwelcome. Her captors treated the evil trek like a lark, sending a harper ahead of them, singing as he went. At a great cleft in the hills the trail went straight up, turning into a rocky stair climbing the wooded abyss, then disappearing completely. Here she had to dismount and lead the palfrey. The poor horse faced as dismal a fate as she did, taken from her warm stall and oat trough to stumble through wicked hills, starving on grass forage that would hardly feed a hare.

Atop the pass she remounted. Here the land opened up, revealing a patch of high treeless moorland with an ancient standing stone in its center, surrounded by fairy rings. Heaven only knew how the Welsh had hauled the huge stone up to the summit. From that flat space Clare could see far and away, spying the great rounded billow of Mynydd Maen — the Mountain of Stone. To the north rose the first peaks of the Black Mountains, a dark bloodstained district, implacably savage even for Wales. Aside from such dismal landmarks, she felt so cut off from the world that she might as well have been on the moon.

Gwen reached up and took her hand, saying, "Caer, can you feel the magic?"

Clare nodded silently. Any girl suckled by a witch could smell magic in the air. Bird song mixed with rushing water and the hot buzzing of summer. Farther off, the harper sang ahead of them. Saying a prayer for Nuala, she squeezed Gwen's hand, then she kicked her mount and they started again.

Past the standing stone the trail reappeared, winding down into a wooded glen backed by tall cliffs. Torrents of white water tumbled in thin cataracts to a meadow sprinkled with rosemary and sweet-william. At the foot of this hidden glen sat a robber's roost, a square thatched hall half sunk in the ground, framed in oak and walled with lath and plaster,

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surrounded by fruit trees. Caeradar's greyhounds bounded out to greet Rory.

Gwen helped her dismount, then pulled off her boots, washing her feet with water from an earthen well. Clare had seen the Welsh dig such wells, using forked sticks to find the right spot in a meadow or paddock, or even in the dirt floor of a hovel. They would dig down, and there would be water, cool and clear, deep beneath the ground. It was one of their more clever magics.

Inside the robber's hall half an ox turned above the hearth, while a young girl sang and played on the harp. Children laughed and giggled at Clare. She wondered how such sweet winsome toddlers could be sired by astonishingly ugly brigands. Sitting her down, Gwen fetched ale to go with sheep's cheese and "coch yr wden" — which turned out to mean "hung goat."

Wrung out from the day's ordeal, Clare picked at her goat, confronted by table manners that would make the Irish wince. No napkins, no tablecloths, no tables, everyone ate together off the floor, from trenchers of boiled meat laid on green rushes. All were welcome at a Welsh feast. There was no such thing as a beggar — the first slice of meat always going to the poor. Rory sat beside her, eating from the same trencher. Typical Welsh manners, seating a dog-boy next to a lady. But no insult could make the day any worse. Or so she assumed.

"Eat, eat," Gwen chided. "This is special." Clare asked what was so special about hung goat.

Gwen leaned closer, whispering in her ear. "This is your wedding feast."

"My what?" She must have misheard the Welsh.

"Well, not a Saxon wedding. Like in a church."

That was certain. "Wedded to who?"

"To Rory, of course."

Clare stared in surprise at the red-headed dog-boy, fishing for meat from her trencher. Gwen reminded her, "Your brother Edmund swore many times that if he did not kill you, or lock you in a nunnery, he would wed you to Rory. Well, here you are, still alive and not a nun...."

"Don't I have anything to say?" Clare hissed back. She had feared she might be killed or raped, but forced matrimony was an unexpected torture — even from the Welsh.

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"Of course." Gwen looked surprised. "Any woman can refuse to wed. But you are of age. And in your present condition you could hardly do better. Look at him. He is fair, his limbs are strong, and his toes are long and straight. And one of the hostages your brother murdered was our cousin, Gruffydd ap Cadwallon, which makes Rory the rightful lord of Ebbw Vale. He is doing you an honor. Most men want to bed a woman before taking her to wife."

Clare told her such talk was scandalous. It was hard to be a Christian under these conditions, but Clare meant to make the attempt — she had no other defense.

Gwen shook her head. "Not scandalous, Lady Caer, just common sense. Would you buy a pig in a sack? Choosing a mate is at least as important. The man of my dreams must be as upright in bed as he looks in the saddle. But my brother is headstrong. And he has loved you for a very long time."

Clare snorted. She had seen the man of Gwen's dreams. As long as she had her saxe knife, no man or dog-boy was going to bed her at the finish of some drunken Welsh repast. No matter how long and straight his toes were.

She stared across the boiled meat at Rory. Like all Welsh, he always seemed moody and imaginative, a hot-tempered troublesome hostage, prone to fits of gallantry. When she was seven, and Edmund knocked her down and broke her finger, it was Rory who picked her up, washed the mud off her, and carried her crying to Nuala. She had meant to thank him. But he had never asked for thanks, and she had never given it.

Seeing him here, in his own hall, he did look straight and upright, and tolerably clean — but a Welsh lordling, handy with dogs, was hardly what she had looked for in a husband. She had always pictured herself catching the eye of some young earl, or passing prince. But none ever passed that close to Caeradar. Now it turned out, she had long ago caught someone's eye.

Singing and feasting went on late into the summer evening. Even the children joined in, not singing along with their elders, but each taking different parts, all coming together at the end in perfect B-flat harmony. When every scrap of food was eaten, a thin bed of rushes was made up along one wall. Guests and hosts slept together, using cloaks for blankets,

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children burrowing in among the adults. Gwen lay on one side of her, Rory on the other — making no attempt to take advantage of their makeshift "wedding" feast. Indeed, he had barely said two words to Clare, which irked her as much as physical insult.

She got up in the middle of the night to huddle by the hearth fire, stiff on one side, frozen on the other — thinking of her warm feather bed in Caeradar, and Nuala sleeping beside her. Many more nights like this might easily drive her mad. Slowly the fire warmed her, soothing her aches. Just when she was ready to attempt sleep, Gwen got up to join her. Then Rory.

The three of them sat by the night fire, just like when they were young — when Clare was the castle pet, not yet a lady, and Gwen and Rory looked after her. Only this time there was no childish chatter. The day weighed hard on all three of them. Finally, Rory nodded toward the door, saying, "Come."

Clare looked at Gwen. Her former servant and would be sister-in-law took her hand, and they went out side-by-side.

Rory waited in the moonlight, being greeted by his dogs. Observing a holy silence, he led them back up the glen. The dogs came with them. Guided by the sound of rushing water, they climbed to the summit of the pass, where the standing stone stood amid fairy rings.

Here Rory turned to speak, standing before the monolith, red hair shining in the moonlight, backed by his dogs. "First I will tell you my descent. I am Rory ap Owain ap Caradog ap Gruffydd...." The boy went on and on, giving his descent back to Rhodri Mawr the ancestor of all South Welsh princes, then back to Brutus who fled the sack of Troy. An impressive display of memory, but being Welsh he could have easily gone back to Noah and the Flood. He ended by saying, "My sister will have told you I mean to make myself Lord of Ebbw Vale, and to take you to wed."

Clare nodded. "So I have been told."

"I have planned this for some time."

Clare nodded again. She remembered how it had felt to be lifted up and held by him the time Edmund had broken her finger. He had been big and strong, and angry at Edmund, but exceptionally tender with her, though smelling badly of dog. In the years since, she had somewhat caught up to

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him in size, and surpassed him in station — ceasing to be playmates, and becoming lady and servant. Until today.

Rory went on, "It is only proper that I ask your family's consent. But your mother lives far away in the Land of the Franks. And I cannot ask your brother Edmund, who has murdered my kin."

Clare thought, "You could ask me!" But she did not say it. Trying to deal rationally with the Welsh was as senseless as plowing the sea.

"So I have brought you and Gwen here, that I may ask your father's consent." He nodded to Gwen, who knelt facing the priapic stone and crooned in Welsh, calling to her demon lover.

Strongbow's ghost came striding into the clearing in full armor with his bow across his back. One look and the gazehounds went whimpering off, leaving the three humans and the spirit alone beside the standing stone. Gwen smiled and got up.

Rory addressed the ghost gravely. "You will know why I have called you here. I wish to marry your daughter, and make her the Lady of Ebbw Vale. I vow to keep her, and honor her, and take no concubines without her consent."

"Admirable intentions," Strongbow declared. "But you are asking for an earl's daughter, and must offer more than fair intentions."

Clare cut in, feeling like the prize cow at a cattle auction. "This earl's daughter refuses to be bartered over without her consent." Whatever vows the boy made were bound to be meaningless. Not the promise of heaven, nor the threat of hell, could make the Welsh keep their word. They said whatever pleased them at the moment. And it clearly pleased Rory to have her to wife — he would say what it took to get her.

Strongbow looked taken aback. "Daughter, you must someday marry. This boy seems respectful, and marrying a savage has its special charms. I myself married an Irish princess...."

"Much to Mother's regret," Clare pointed out.

"Your mother was never a practical woman."

Rory interrupted, asking Clare, "What do you want?"

"I want Caeradar." It was all she had ever wanted.

"But Edmund holds it," Rory objected.

"Then kill him," Strongbow suggested. "Hell would be all the happier for his company."

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Rory snorted. "Simpler said than done." Despite being addicted to strife, the Welsh were loath to suffer losses — having no mercenaries or paid allies — no one but friends and family to send into battle.

"Use your native cunning," Strongbow suggested. "An Earl's daughter is not easily won. Did you ever hear of the time that I was besieged in Dublin...."

Rory nodded. "By High King Roderic O'Connor with 30,000 clansmen, and a Viking fleet in the bay. The harpers sing of it."

Strongbow beamed, turning to Clare. "I told you he was a boy of parts — and educated to boot. You could well do worse."

Clare said nothing. Doing worse was not at all her aim.

"But you were safe within the walls of Dublin," Rory pointed out. "We are the ones outside. Edmund is in his big strong castle, behind heavy barred gates...."

"But he will open them for me," Clare declared.

Ghost and dog-boy turned to stare at her.

She crossed her arms, looking levelly at Rory. "If I get Edmund to open the gates. And if you defeat him. And if I am once more Lady of Caeradar. Then I will consider your suit." If you are brave, and loving, and I get a church wedding.

Her father's ghost grinned. "Spoken like a Strongbow. My daughter has given her terms — now you must meet them." Despite all that had happened, her heart still leaped when he called her daughter. The ghost winked at Gwen and disappeared, leaving his bow behind.

Rory bent down and picked it up. It was no ghostly bow, but a real South Welsh longbow, cut from dwarf-elm, rough, unpolished, and deadly. He slung it over his shoulder and they trooped back toward the thatched hall. Halfway down the glen, the dogs came loping up to greet them.

A ten-day later Clare saw Caeradar again. In the first blush of morning she came riding out of the wood on her palfrey headed past the upper bailey. Gwen rode at her side, aboard one of those meddlesome little Welsh ponies. Rory's dog pack loped ahead of the horses into the cleared space around the castle. The hay had not been cut, and as the hounds bounded forward they appeared and disappeared in the tall green-gold grass.

When the Welsh first took her into the woods, she had thought she

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was seeing the castle for the last time. It felt strange to see Caeradar again, knowing she could not just go cantering up to the postern. It was the Rabbit Gate, the one she had released Rory and Gwen through.

She had made sure she looked her best. Her blue riding dress was scrubbed and mended, and her cape was turned out to show the yellow satin lining. She wore a wreath of summer flowers in her hair and a heavy gold torque around her neck. More gold shone on her wrists and ankles. She felt part Welsh princess, part Our Lady of the May.

The postern gate swung open. Clare cut slowly across the cleared space, not aimed for the postern, riding like she meant to pass beneath the castle walls and head on down the Ebbw. As if she were going to call on the Bishop in Llandaff, or visit her cousins in Caerleon.

Edmund came riding out with a troop of horsemen at his heels, the castle men-at-arms and twenty mounted sergeants, trampling down the uncut hay. Edmund looked wary, dressed in a chain-mail hauberk and coif, and wearing a steel skull-cap. Clare knew he would come out. He might not have come if she had begged or threatened — but he could not let her ride lackadaisically past, as if she had not a care in Creation.

Nor could he be sure she would not make trouble downriver. Bishop Saltmarsh might easily take her side. Together they might go to her legitimate half-sister, Isabel de Clare, the "wise and good" Damsel of Estriguil, and her over-scrupulous husband, William the Marshal — renowned for his honor and integrity. Or they could go to the Countess of Gloucester, who was married to Prince John. One of them might be willing to hear her case. If he let her slip past.

Clare reined in, watching him come on. She rose in her saddle, calling out in a clear voice, "Leave me be."

Edmund smiled. That was one thing he could not do. Since the Welsh had not killed her, he wanted her in his hands.

"I beseech you. Go back," she shouted. Clare wanted it to be clear, to God and to all, that she had given him fair warning. The Lord Almighty does not seek the death of the sinner, but to see him turn away from wickedness.

Edmund spurred his horse forward, his brisk confidence returning. The more she begged, the better he felt, the more sure he was that he had her.

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She settled back in her saddle, saying a soft prayer for Edmund's sake, "Then may Mary have mercy on you — even as you have shown no mercy to me."

Welsh rose up out of the long grass. Four dozen Gwent bowmen, whose fathers and uncles had been murdered by the Sheriff of Herefordshire at the Abergavenny massacre — men always thirsting for revenge against the Saxon. Rory was with them, rising up and stringing her father's bow. They had hidden there half the night, with their bowstrings coiled beneath their armpits, to save them from the dew.

The first flight of arrows caught the mounted men as they reined in, slicing through mail and leather jacks, creating havoc among the horses and emptying saddles. Two more flights was all it took to send the survivors fleeing for the bailey gate.

Rory bounded after them, calling on Edmund to stand and fight. At the same time Gwen loosed the pack, and her brother shouted for the dogs to turn his prey. Welsh greyhounds are near to being the fastest creatures on four legs, far faster than a horse and armored rider. They quickly had Edmund's horse turned, leaping out of the grass in the startled animal's face, herding the frightened mount like some man-carrying sheep.

Rory planted himself in the horseman's path, bending the big rough-cut bow. Edmund had his broadsword out, beating at the dogs. Seeing Rory he spurred his horse, guiding it with his knees, his shield covering his chest, his sword arm straight in front of him locked behind the point.

Standing with bow bent, the nock to his ear, Rory waited until he could barely miss. Then his fingers released, and Strongbow's bow sang. Clare saw her father's ghost guiding the shaft. The arrow sped right between the horse's ears, over the top of the shield, and beneath the steel cap, straight into Edmund's right eye.

Edmund's head snapped back, and his steel cap flew off. His sword dropped from nerveless fingers. He was dead before he felt the blow. An easier death than he had given others.

Running up, Rory set down the bow and retrieved the fallen broadsword, using it to take off Edmund's head. He stood triumphant in the hay, giving a glad, fierce Welsh war cry, holding up Edmund's head by its bloody blond hair. The arrow shaft still stuck out of one eye.

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Turning her head away, Clare heard her father's ghost applaud, "Well done, lad." All she could think was, "This is the boy I mean to marry?"

> "Women are naturally inclined to witchcraft...the more women there are, the more witches there will be."
>
> —The Talmud

Next Friday, Witch's Night found Clare by the banks of the Rhone dancing naked under the arches of the ancient bridge at Avignon. Gwen was with her, along with her mother, and witches from Ireland, Spain, and Germany. Maid Marian stood in the middle of the ring of dancers, women whirling around her, arms raised crescent-wise above their heads, singing:

"Sous le pont d'Avignon, on y danse tout en rond..."

A night wind blew the odors of the crowded city from across the river. Avignon's narrow filthy streets were so crammed with sewage, tannery waste, and open privies that the summer heat caused country visitors to faint. But on Witch's Night the only swooning came from women overwhelmed by worship and the dance.

When the dancing was done her mother introduced her to Queen Eleanor, the patroness of Fontevrault, Queen of England, France, and Ireland, and Dutchess of Aquitaine. Though there was no royalty on Witch's Night, Clare fell to her knees. Eleanor had long been her heroine, the mother of King Richard and Prince John, coming from a famous family of excommunicates, having been personally damned by Saint Bernard. Near to seventy, she was still tall and stately, with long white hair and blue eyes. Every inch a queen even in the nude.

Eleanor smiled. "Rise, young lady. On Mother's night we kneel only to Mary."

Clare rose, still in awe of her queen. She could well believe the story that an infidel Sultan once begged Eleanor to be his Sultana.

"Your mother says you will soon wed," observed Eleanor.

Clare nodded, afraid to speak.

"You are young. But so was I when I married my first king. As heiress

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of Aquitaine I had no choice. In the end, I had to marry a couple of kings to keep lesser lords from committing matrimony on me."

Clare said it was much the same with her.

"And do you love him?" Eleanor asked.

Clare could not lie to her. "I do not know. Right now it feels like a grand adventure, all glorious and exciting. He is brave and comely, and Gwen's brother." She introduced her serving-girl-sister-in-law. "We have held each other's life in our hands — I freed him, and he saved me. He has loved me since I was little, and together we shall rule the Ebbw Vale."

"That is not the same thing as you loving him," Eleanor reminded her.

"I know," Clare admitted.

Clare's mother shook her head. "I envy her excitement. I loved a man dearly, but we were never married. Never together before the world."

"And does that make you sad?" asked the Queen. Her own marriages had been notoriously unhappy. One husband divorced her, her second husband imprisoned her. For sixteen years her only freedom had been on Witch's Nights.

"Sometimes," Clare's mother admitted. "But in one way I am infinitely blessed."

"How is that?" Clare had never heard her mother speak so wistfully about her love for her father.

Mother reached out and took her hand. "I had a child by the man I most loved in all the world. You are a love child in every sense of the word — conceived in love, and love alone. Not for inheritance. Not for advantage. I would not have missed being your mother for anything. Not even to be...."

Mother stopped, flustered, flushing all the way down to her toes. Queen Eleanor smiled at her embarrassment. She knew women commonly said that they would not give up this or that, "Not even to be Queen of England and France." They just never said it to her face.

Mother came to Llandaff for the wedding. They were married by Bishop Saltmarsh in his great Celtic church, with the Welsh on one side and the Normans on the other. Prince John was there to give her away. He was merely Earl of Gloucester — and that only by right of marriage — but since Good King Richard was well-known to be a sodomite, John was

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bound to succeed him. Already he had his own court, with a justiciar, chancellor, seal-bearer, and seneschal. With him was William de Briouze, who planned the Abergavenny massacre, along with his sharp-tongued wife, who had danced naked with Clare beneath the bridge at Avignon.

Across the aisle the Welsh were led by Rory's royal kinsmen, Lord Rhys ap Gruffydd and Prince Morgan of Glamorgan, happily watching one of their own becoming lord of a Norman keep. Glad to win Ebbw Vale back from the Saxon.

Gwen was maid of honor. And Strongbow's ghost was there at the altar to give Clare to Rory — but only the three of them could see him.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Border, by Marina Fitch, Ace Books, January 1999,$5.99.

IN FAIRY tales, folklore, and mythology, borders are traditionally places of enchantment — potent bridges between what is and what might be. The border between Mexico and the U.S. is a place of heartbreak, hope, and despair. When you combine the two, you have the potential for a heady mix.

In her new novel Marina Fitch doesn't really stray from the World As It Is into the magical fields beyond. Most of the novel takes place in the borderlands, that area where the world is as we know it, but into which magic has strayed. It begins with an Irishman living in Mexico, on the run from an act of sectarian violence in his homeland. He has met and married a Mexican woman and now has two daughters: Rosa, who resembles her mother, and Maria/Mary, who looks white.

The first half of the book switches back and forth between the past and present. One plotline tells how the family, on the run from Irish assassins, attempts an illegal border crossing which results in only Mary and her father getting safely across. The other takes place in the present where we find a now adult and pregnant Rosa attempting to make the same crossing once more. It's a heartbreaking and evocative section, rich with character and tension.

The second half introduces a number of new characters, one of whom is the now adult Mary who, when she meets her uncle, begins once more the search to find her sister Rosa.

The Border is simply too rich with detail and wonderful characterizations to attempt to condense it here. The problems of the otherworld and ours mingle with equal fascination. We have Mary's search for her sister which brings a tangle of estrangement into her

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marriage, already suffering tensions because of her despair at being unable to have a child; her artist friend Teddy, crippled by a disease and unable to work at her art; a mysterious Mexican woman, suspected of killing goats and drinking their blood; another equally mysterious Mexican woman working for Mary's husband, who is mute but has the ability to draw the most private realizations from those with whom she "converses." And then there are the angels, and Rosa's mysterious invisible companion....

And, of course, there remain the questions, what happened to Rosa at the border and where is she now?

From start to finish, this is an enchanting, noteworthy novel, one that I know I will be rereading soon. That's just as soon as I track down a copy of her earlier book, *The Seventh Heart*, and devour it.

Choice of Evil, by Andrew Vachss, Knopf, 1999, $23.

For some time now, Andrew Vachss has been using proceeds from his secondary career as an author to ensure that he can continue his primary career as a defense lawyer. This is a necessity since his clients don't have incomes of their own — they are children, some of them only infants. Vachss also uses his novels to promote the need for stronger laws to protect the rights of children and other groups of individuals who are often poorly served by society as a whole, groups such as abused women and gays.

All of which is very commendable, but the real proof, so far as we're concerned in this column, is how does the new novel stand up as fiction? Happily there continues to be more to Vachss's novels and stories than an author creating work simply to promote a just cause.

This time out Vachss's continuing character Burke, a streetwise character living on the margins of regular society, is drawn into the search for a man who is murdering known pedophiles and gay-bashers. Burke is pulled in for questioning by the police, which doesn't surprise him — "I was born a suspect," is how he puts it. But as the novel progresses, everything points to a childhood companion of Burke's — a cold-hearted assassin named Wesley. The only problem is, Wesley is dead.

With *Choice of Evil*, Vachss strays the closest he's come yet into the supernatural. There's the witch Strega, a dangerous woman who always seems to know more

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than should be possible. There's the concept of the Gatekeeper who will allow the return of an evil man or woman, but only if you bring him a new soul for every soul the killer took. And then there's Wesley. Either back from the dead himself, or someone's bringing him back by cutting a deal with the Gatekeeper.

What's particularly fascinating about this Burke novel is how Vachss explores the creation of a myth, how something can become real if enough people believe in it. In that sense, it's not important whether or not Wesley has come back from the dead, but that people believe that he has.

There's more to the book than simply that, of course. Vachss writes with a lean, hard-boiled prose. His characters are tough and capable, but blessed with great hearts. He takes us down among the bottom feeders of society, a place unfamiliar to most of us (I hope), but one of which we should be aware. Because that world impacts on our own, no matter how far uptown or out in the 'burbs we might live from it. And in that world, innocents are imperiled. What Vachss does is remind us that they are our responsibility. Their safety lies with us. Their lives depend on whether we are willing to reach a hand out to help them, or if we turn our backs on them.

The Silicon Dagger, by Jack Williamson, Tor, April 1999, $23.95.

Though his writing career now spans seven decades, Jack Williamson proves with his latest novel that he still has what it takes to tell an engaging story and make his readers think.

The Silicon Dagger begins when Clay Barstow's brother Alden Kirk is murdered. Kirk had just written a book warning of increased domestic terrorist activity to come in the wake of the advances that have been made in information technology. Since the last place Kirk visited was McAdam County in Kentucky — a microcosm, in Kirk's opinion, of the trouble brewing throughout America — Barstow goes there to see if he can track down his brother's murderers.

As one would expect, things quickly go from bad to worse. Barstow has hardly arrived in McAdam County before he becomes involved in a conspiracy to secede from the union that's powered by an amazing new technology developed by a local software engineer. Barstow runs afoul of the local

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militia and very suddenly, he's on the run and wanted for murder.

Much of *The Silicon Dagger* is taken up with discussions involving the impact of the rapid dissemination of information today and the speculation of how new defensive/offensive technologies will change our concepts of national boundaries, as well as sidebars into the impulses that fuel racism, local militias, Libertarianism, and fundamental Christianity. And it's to Williamson's credit that rather than bog the story down, these discussions are the story, and a riveting one at that.

Now, some readers might feel that Williamson's pulp origins are a little too evident in terms of characterization and how the plot unfolds. And others might find it too distancing in how much of the "action" takes place at one step removed: Barstow following the stories on Internet news/video shows from his various hiding places. But the former only proves the vitality still to be found in such a writing style, while the latter proves to be a fascinating method of presenting all the various sides to an argument.

In short, this is a novel of ideas, and an important one in terms of how it makes us consider where the next few years will take us as we ride into the millennium on the back of the rapid changes in technology and the ever-escalating erosion of an individual's personal freedoms. The arguments are presented fairly from a number of viewpoints and make for a fascinating read.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Armageddon Summer, by Jane Yolen & Bruce Coville, Harcourt Brace, 1998, $24.

The Cure, by Sonia Levitin, Harcourt Brace, 1999, $16.

Clockwork, by Philip Pullman, Arthur A. Levine Press, October 1998, $14.95.

Never Trust a Dead Man, by Vivian Vande Velde, Harcourt Brace, 1999, $17.

I THOUGHT this column would be easy. My editor said, given that I had been requesting a number of titles generally considered to be YA in recent months, that he'd be happy to see a YA round-up for the magazine, and I jumped at the chance. What, after all, could be simpler than reviewing books like the lean and less complicated ones that introduced me to the genre in the first place?

When I read a YA novel, some part of my brain kicks into gear, opening a window into that younger reader; I read unfettered by the desire to see every detail and every complexity of life captured and reflected in words. I want, for certain, to be *moved*, but I allow myself to be moved by things that a more hardened reader wouldn't. In short, I exchange skepticism for vulnerability. I approach the books with a little more trust, and a little more faith, in the outcome; I reason that there will be comfort and entertainment and not a little joy along the way.

And of course, reading with this more simple desire, I assumed on some level that writing *about* it would be, well, as simple, as reducible.

Let me now be penitent. I associate YA novels with the simplicity of youth — when, in fact, youth was no more simple a thing than adult life is. All edges and complexities are worn away in memory by time, but they were there. And some of the books I've read recently

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— curled up in an uncomfortable chair in my office because reading in bed requires light which wakes the baby — reminded me of this, not in a humbling way, but in a way that makes me reflective. Well, okay, a slightly humbling way.

Jane Yolen and Bruce Coville write a lot. They don't normally do it together, although if *Armageddon Summer* is any indication, that's a great pity. There are several different ways of collaborating, and Yolen and Coville have chosen to write alternating chapters, from the viewpoints of Marina and Jed, a young girl and a young boy whose lives are changed when their parents find God in the form of the charismatic Reverend Beelson. What makes Beelson's Believers a bit different from your run-of-the-mill loons is that they know the exact day the world is going to end — and, of course, they know how to beat that end. They climb Mount Weepacut, where they, as righteous men and women, will be saved from the fires that will destroy the world below.

Coville's Jed is a non-believer, a boy roped into the end of the world by a father driven mad with loneliness and despair after his wife's desertion. Yolen's Marina is a girl with a great desire to believe, because belief might be the only thing that holds her family together. They are both extremely credible characters, juggling a sense of responsibility, fear, anger, and insecurity in just the right measure that they are sympathetic.

Marina and Jed are told that the world will be destroyed in fire and after that, they, the True Believers, will come down from the mountain. Fire comes; it will probably not surprise readers to learn that it doesn't herald the end of the world. But at the end of the novel, Jed and Marina are wiser, their lives changed both by what they can — and cannot — control. To Marina's joy, her mother comes to the realization that her belief was unwise, and they all come down from the mountains.

But they see more than they understand; through their eyes, Yolen and Coville paint a bleak picture of adults who are both pathetic enough to be laughable *and* pathetic enough to be dangerous. I don't know how I would have reacted had I been thirteen when I read this. Marina is so glad to have her old mother back...but it's so obvious to *me* as an adult that her old mother and the glassy-eyed fanatic are halves of the same coin, and that the search for salvation —

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for the thing so much bigger than you that you can give up the responsibility of choice and the terror of having to make and live with a decision — will still consume her, and her children.

There are no easy answers in this novel, and there are no simple characterizations; both writers are skilled enough to paint a full picture even through the narrow experience and tangled affections of their narrators. It was a lovely piece of work, but only a simple one if you don't look beyond the surface.

Sonia Levitin's novel, *The Cure*, is theoretically more complex. It opens in a distant future — in 2407 — and focuses on the unfortunate life of one Gemm 16884. Gemm is a throwback to an earlier age; one in which individuality and not conformity were the rule. In order to spare himself and his twin the total negation of "recycling," Gemm voluntarily undergoes The Cure. He is selectively drugged and he is then "sent back" to relive life in a period of earlier earth history.

The year is 1348, and Gemm becomes Johannes, a German Jew in a Strasbourg that is all too aware that Jews might be responsible for the plague killing people by the thousands. Levitin's writing once Gemm becomes Johannes is at its strongest; she evokes the reality of his terrible and short life without a misstep. Unfortunately her ability to create that reality is so strong it makes the frame of the future look very thin and jingoistic. It can however be argued that her point is that the fabric of that future life, devoid of deep emotion and artistic impulse, *is* thin and jingoistic.

The Cure is a way of forcing a member of the United Social Alliance into a world in which the brutality and violence of an uncontrolled and emotional world has not been expunged. This makes sense. Because Gemm has never been exposed to pain, the pain is to be a terrible jolt, a slap in the face; a wake-up call without parallel. And because Gemm shows a tendency toward music, they have selected a period in which music and pain are tied together. The music in question is not tied to pain, but to dignity in the face of insurmountable adversity, and I would expect that the men and women choosing this Cure would be aware of it. That quibble aside, Gemm lives the life he is meant to live and is called back from it when it is at its worst. And then he must make a choice, given what he knows of the past and what he knows of his present.

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The making of that choice is the weakest part of the book; although Levitin is at pains to introduce us to the horrors of that earlier life, it's clear that the choice Gemm is offered is not really a choice; authorial sympathies inform the whole book in a way that Coville's, in particular, in *Armageddon Summer*, don't.

That said, Levitin acknowledges what must be acknowledged: that humanity is both profoundly ugly and profoundly beautiful, and we cannot have one without the other, although the struggle to do so is important.

Philip Pullman's *Clockwork* is not, as many had hoped, the third novel in the trilogy *His Dark Materials*; it's a short piece that is aimed at younger readers, although the book is packaged in a way that clearly screams, "All ages! All ages!" And perhaps it is.

Subtitled "*All Wound Up*," this is a story of clockwork, creativity, desperation, and love. It is dark and gloomy in tone; Pullman's ability to evoke menace is delightful, and possibly the strongest element of his work in this book.

It seems that Karl, the apprentice clockmaker, has fallen behind in the most important endeavor of his young life. Every apprentice clockmaker ends his apprenticeship by creating a masterpiece of springs and gears which he then places in the magnificent clocktower for the entire town to see. The day of the unveiling is tomorrow, but Karl has nothing to offer the town; he has not been doing his work, devoid of inspiration.

Fritz, the local writer, has also not been doing his work, but he is cheerfully certain that all will turn out well for him, and when he is called upon to read his latest horrific invention to the patrons of the local tavern — for he writes tales of horror and mischief — he begins what is not yet finished.

And falls into his own story, a victim of it rather than an author.

This is on one level a story about the clockwork prince, a child made to be the perfect heir to a King and Queen whose concerns were either political or personal, but never parental, and the young girl who saves him. The King and Queen, authors of the little princeling, were nonetheless incapable of love, and just as Fritz, the writer, or Karl, the apprentice, they put into motion events over which they had no control because they *also* had no deeper understanding and no capacity for love or responsibility in

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the aftershock of their initial impulse.

I would like to say that I liked the story more — because all of the elements of it are like clockwork when it functions perfectly — but I found that, like clockwork, it was almost too precise.

Which leads us into the last novel, which is anything but.

Vivian Vande Velde's *Never Trust a Dead Man* is a young adult novel that was over far, far too quickly. Does it make you think? Sort of, but really, on first pass it's just charming and amusing enough that thought is suspended in the best possible way.

A rather unfortunate young man by the name of Selwyn Roweson has lost the woman of his dreams — and the woman he's been pursuing in the obsessive and calf-like way only an adolescent can — to his rival, Farold. Which sucks. But it gets worse...because when the rival winds up dead, he's the only suspect, and the town is in the mood for rough justice.

So they put him in the tomb with the dead man he didn't actually kill...and things go from bad to worse when the not very fast-witted young man is given an opportunity to prove that he's innocent — with the help of an old, ill-tempered witch and his murdered, and very irritating, not-quite-dead dead rival.

Did I mention that Selwyn is not always extremely fast on the uptake? Neither is Farold; the two manage — just — to keep on top of things while they try to find the real killer before it's discovered that Selwyn's execution wasn't. Successful, that is.

I have no idea if a book like this would appeal to young adults or not. As a teenager I lacked a sense of humor, and in truth, I'm only developing one now with the advent of small children because it's either that or go completely insane.

Never Trust a Dead Man is a murder mystery with a twist and a great sense of humor. It also has a gentle lesson or two about appearances and sexism and relationships. This is the first book by Vande Velde I've read, but it certainly — with luck — won't be the last, and while it doesn't scream "all ages!" it probably should.

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Hooking Up

By Michael Kandel

WHAT'S THE MATTER, TOPAZ? asked her mother, pushing her gently toward the door. Topaz said, Nothing. Come on, dear, coaxed her mother in that patient, sad way she had, which made Topaz do whatever her mother wanted. All right, said Topaz, and took a deep breath, shut her eyes for a moment, then opened them and went in.

The children turned to look, just as she expected. The teacher came over with a smile, took Topaz by the hand, and said, Class, this is Topaz. They all stopped what they were doing and stared. There must have been a hundred of them. Some of them were mouthing the word Topaz, some were just staring, and a few in the back were making faces. She looked at the floor, she couldn't help it. There were too many eyes on her.

You'll sit over here, the teacher said, right by me, and gave her a quick hug so she wouldn't be afraid anymore. The teacher smelled of soap. She led Topaz to a chair made of real wood. On Nerol, such a chair would be in a museum, and there would be a shield around it so people couldn't touch the wood or breathe on it too much. Topaz knew wood when she

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saw it because her father had a small wood box that he ran his fingers over when he was troubled by something. The wood of the box was called maple, and it was soft and warm in a way that no plastic could be. All the chairs in the room were wood, but they were not smooth and clean like the maple box, they were beaten up and dirty. They had dents. She thought: I'll never get used to it here.

The teacher said to Topaz, I'm Ms. C. Then she said to the class, Topaz is from Nerol. She was born here, but she went to Nerol with her parents when she was two, and now she's come back. Isn't that interesting? I'm sure she has fascinating things to tell us. How many of you have been on another planet? Only three hands went up.

Ms. C. turned and told Topaz's mother, Don't worry, she'll be all right. Bye dear, Topaz's mother said to Topaz, waving, see you later, and she left. Topaz could hear her mother's shoes clicking farther and farther away down the long hall.

She was given a notebook that had a screen cloudy from a lot of tiny scratches. One of the keys wobbled but worked okay if you hit it in the center and not too hard. The notebook was awfully slow and didn't have a lot of memory. This was not a very good school, even with the chairs of real wood. But her father had explained to her, in his serious voice, that good schools on Earth were too expensive for their family budget. In the Franklin Child Center, at least, you got to go to an actual physical classroom and learn social skills. Learning social skills at home by software, her father said, was ridiculous, like learning to swim without getting in the water.

Everyone on Nerol swam at least an hour a day, because the gravity wasn't good for your vertebrae if you didn't do that. The gravity squushed your vertebrae and made them rub together, which could cripple you for life. Look at Uncle Archer in his big brace and taking three different kinds of pain pills every morning with his orange juice: blue, green, and yellow.

Topaz was asked to stand up and tell the class about Nerol, as she expected. She had prepared something to say, but it sounded so stupid, she wished she could be back home in her bed and under the covers. On Nerol, machines do everything and some of them look just like people. We have to wear special clothes and glasses in the summer because of the rays from

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our sun. We don't have a moon but we do have a beautiful ring, and in the autumn, from Founder's Day to Christmas, there are so many shooting stars, it's like a fountain of light every night. Our year is fifteen days longer than a year on Earth. Since I've been away six years, that makes me three months younger than I would have been if I stayed on Earth. Ms. C. said, when Topaz was finished and took her seat, Isn't that something?

At lunchtime, after they ate from trays in a cafeteria and all went out to play in the fenced-in park, two girls came over to Topaz and introduced themselves. I'm Cherry, said the girl who had blond curls, and that's Anemone. She said Anemone in four syllables, pointing to the other girl, who had a big nose, freckles, and brown curls. Topaz wondered if she should make her hair curly too, if that was the fashion here. She would ask her mother.

The three of them played a game that Topaz didn't understand. It was a word game, but had leap frog in it if you got a word wrong. The girls laughed hard, so Topaz laughed with them. She liked Cherry and Anemone, especially Cherry, who was so pretty with her tiny nose. Topaz kept wanting to say Me-ne-mo-ne instead of A-ne-mo-ne, but after she repeated it to herself enough times, she got the name right. The words were shouted faster and faster, and the turns at leap frog got so confusing, you didn't know whether you had to jump or bend over, and soon she was laughing as hard as they were. If you didn't know better, you wouldn't have guessed that this girl had just come from another planet.

You can call me at Cherry fifty-seven Z slash two, that's my netplace, said Cherry, when it was time for the children to go back in. Oh, we don't have a modem yet or a netplace, said Topaz, we just moved in. What are you talking about, a modem? said Cherry, wrinkling her forehead. A modem to call you, said Topaz. We don't need a modem for that, said Cherry. She's not hooked up, Anemone explained. Oh right, said Cherry, and they both stopped and looked at Topaz for a moment before they continued walking.

Well, when you get hooked up, said Cherry — this was when they were in the hall among a hundred talking students heading back to Ms. C.'s classroom — you can call me at Cherry fifty-seven Z slash two. Don't forget. I won't, said Topaz, and said it to herself enough times to remember it.

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There wasn't much lesson-teaching for the rest of the day. Topaz didn't need to use her notebook. The students mostly did what Ms. C. called interrelating exercises in small groups around the room. In Topaz's group there was a short boy called Leo. Other children laughed at him as if he were a joke because he had such large ears, but he was very smart when he spoke. There was also a girl called Heather, but she didn't interrelate much, she was too stuck-up, though Topaz couldn't see the reason. And finally there was another girl, whose name and face Topaz didn't remember afterward. The children had to talk on one of five topics, then disagree about one of five things, then share an idea or a plan of their own. Topaz didn't find it very interesting. She looked around for a clock but didn't see one. Evidently people on Earth didn't care about time as much as people on Nerol did.

Do you have the time? she whispered to the girl who sat on her left when the exercises were over and they were all back in their assigned seats. What? asked the girl. The time, do you know what time it is? It's three twenty-seven, said the girl, big-eyed. How do you know that, asked Topaz — because the time was down to the exact minute — if you don't have a watch? The girl smiled tentatively, as if thinking that Topaz was making a joke but not sure. Another girl gestured, making a motion at her own head with a finger, and whispered to the girl on Topaz's left, but Topaz heard it: She's not hooked up. Oh, said the girl on Topaz's left.

Ms. C. had them sing a song Topaz never heard before, and not long after that, musical chimes sounded. The children all got up and took their satchels from their lockers, and Topaz's mother came into the room. How did you like your first day? she asked. She did wonderfully, said Ms. C. I'm so glad, said Topaz's mother, giving Topaz a hug, but not too much of one since they were in public. She took her daughter by the hand. They left the Franklin Child Center and went home by the aboveground shuttle, which was slower but less crowded. See all the trees? Topaz's mother said. Doesn't it smell nice here? Topaz had to admit that everything smelled nice on Earth, much better than on Nerol, and the air was clearer, without any red in it.

As soon as they were in the door, Topaz asked her mother, What's hooked up mean? Her mother poured her a glass of milk at the kitchen table, gave her a sugar cookie, and sat down beside her as Topaz ate it. I've

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been meaning to talk to you about that, said her mother. It's something we didn't do with you before we left Earth, because it's not necessary on Nerol and you were too young anyway. I'm hooked up, but your father isn't because he was too busy at the time and didn't need it at work, and also he's kind of old-fashioned, you know. But he'll be getting hooked up now.

What is it? asked Topaz. It's really nothing, said her mother. They've perfected it. It used to be trouble and unreliable, but now it's not. They give you a booklet to read about the plon, it's really just a user's manual, and then they give you a local anesthetic so you don't feel a thing. You might get a little dizzy and have a low fever for a day after, but it's nothing to worry about. You just take an ambulin. Topaz took ambulins all the time, even when she wasn't sick. They were like vitamins.

What's it for? asked Topaz. It's very convenient, said her mother. When you're hooked up, you can be on the net inside your head, wherever you go. Oh, said Topaz, understanding, that's why Cherry doesn't need a modem. And that's why the children can tell time without a watch. Yes, said Topaz's mother, and lots of other things you'll learn about as you get older. Most people on Earth are hooked up now. I think it's about eighty-five percent. Maybe ninety percent.

How do they do it? asked Topaz. Well, they put a little thing in your brain, said her mother. It's called a plon. It's so little, you can hardly see it, and it does all the attaching in there by itself, with your neurons, in about two hours. It's a very clever thing. It doesn't matter what kind of brain you have, either, because people's brains are different, you know. I read how a man in Pakistan had reversed lobes, and the plon didn't have any problem with that.

I don't think I'd like something inside my brain, said Topaz. She once read a horror story about a spider that got inside a person's brain and took over and made him do terrible things like murder his sweetheart. The story gave her the creeps whenever she thought about it. That was the last horror story she read. It's really no more than getting a vaccination, her mother said. We're scheduled to have you hooked up, and your father too, next week, Monday, right after school. We'll go out for ice cream and melon afterward. Topaz said with a sigh, I guess I have to do it, if all the other children are hooked up. Her mother patted her knee and smiled. You're such a big girl, she said. I'm very pleased with you.

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But the Saturday before their appointment to be hooked up, Topaz got the flu. Her nose ran, she coughed, and she was achy all over. This was to be expected, said her father. The bugs on Earth are different, and you haven't been exposed to all of them, even with the shots you had before we came. Take it easy and drink a lot of liquids. He tucked her in her bed and kissed her forehead. His lips were cool and he smelled good. I'll have to get hooked up without you, he said. You won't be there to hold my hand, poor me, he joked.

Cherry and Anemone came to visit. Topaz's mother made them all Nerolian milkshakes, which is kava syrup and licorice jimmies added to the ice cream. The Earth girls loved it. I never had anything like this, Ms. P., said Cherry. Topaz's mother gave her more. They played dolls on Topaz's bed. Anemone had brought three antique Austrian dolls. They're beautiful, said Topaz, afraid to touch them. They're expensive, said Anemone. You wouldn't believe how much. The three girls played carefully with them, making up a wonderful story about princesses.

Topaz had to stay home for three days. She slept a lot and watched Earth compuvision, which delighted and alarmed her at the same time. There were an endless number of shows, and the neatest games imaginable, and if the focus wasn't always as good as the screen she had had on Nerol, the colors were much better. But some of the shows and games were strange and one or two seemed evil. They reminded her of Romero back home, who was finally taken out of school on the psychologist's orders and put in an institution.

After Topaz returned to school at the Franklin Child Center, her mother made another appointment for her to be hooked up. And we'll get your hair curled too, she said. Topaz was proud of her mother for being so smart — Topaz hadn't said one word yet about getting her hair curled, but her mother knew anyway.

In the hall Topaz got into a conversation — she didn't know how it happened — with a boy. His name was Lance, and he was tall and had a deep, manly voice. Lance had heard she wasn't hooked up. No kidding? he said, but in a friendly way that meant she had done something remarkable, maybe admirable. He helped her carry her satchel to class, and after school he walked with her to the upper shuttle stop.

What do you think of Earth, Topaz? he asked. It's all right, she said.

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I've never been to Nerol, he said, but it must be neat to see robots that you can't tell from people. All you have to do, Topaz told him, is get close to one and sniff. They don't smell like people, they smell like rubber and plastic. He said, Why don't you come to the movies with me Saturday? There's *The Beta King, Part Three* playing. What's *The Beta King, Part Three*? Topaz asked. It's the latest war movie, said Lance. You see people being torn limb from limb and impaled and you can't tell it's not real. She said, Who wants to see people being torn apart? That's not fun. She didn't know what impaled was, but it was probably nasty. It's just a movie, he said. I can't imagine paying to see a lot of people die, she said. It sounds sick. You sure are corny, he said, but from the look in his eyes you would have thought he wanted to give her a kiss. Topaz had never had a boy give her a look like that before. She couldn't tell if she liked it. She would think about it later.

That evening after supper, Topaz's mother and father took her to the top of the famous Power Tower so she could see all the lights. The sky above them wasn't as interesting as on Nerol, since there was only three-quarters of a moon and it was only a plain ivory or bone white, but the lights on the ground were every color of the rainbow and they twinkled and moved wonderfully, like magic jewels dancing. It's enchanting, said her mother. Don't you love Earth? Yes, said Topaz. You don't sound enthusiastic, remarked her father. I'm getting used to it, said Topaz, and when she said that, both her mother and father bent down and gave her a hug, together. Topaz imagined Lance hugging her too.

That night Topaz wondered what it would be like to have curls. She had never had curls. She wondered if it would bother her if they bounced on her forehead and cheeks when she ran, the way they did for Cherry and Anemone and many other girls at the school. With curly hair, she wouldn't have pigtails anymore. She thought about that for a while. She wondered if she would ever be rich enough to own an antique Austrian doll, but she didn't think so. Her father was smarter than most people, but he was always talking about their budget and shaking his head.

She sighed, because her life was changing so much. She was changing, too. She was already so different, and in only a few days. She closed her eyes and felt that she was floating on her bed. It was because of the weak gravity here. She wondered, as she floated, if she would swim on Earth too

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and what that would be like. She wondered if the waves would be the same, because of the difference in the gravity and the difference in the water. Wondering about the differences between Earth and Nerol, she fell asleep.

When it was time for her appointment, Topaz and her mother went to a glass building and up an escalator to a room where there was a sharp piney smell and a lot of people waiting. One boy had a bandage on his head. His lower lip stuck out, as if he had been punished. It made Topaz feel funny in her stomach to see the bandage, though the bandage didn't have any blood on it. She hoped the plon wouldn't hurt when it went in. She and her mother sat on a very comfortable couch, and to pass the time her mother leafed through a colorful magazine about movie stars. Earth people seemed to like colors more than Nerolians did. In their clothes and shoes, too, there was a lot of color. Perhaps her mother would take her shopping soon, and Topaz would get some new clothes for school.

A woman gestured, and Topaz's mother said, It's our turn. What's wrong with you, Topaz? Topaz didn't know what was wrong with her, but she didn't seem to want to get up. Come on, dear, said her mother. Don't be frightened. It's nothing, I promise. Topaz knew she was being silly, but she couldn't help it. She shook her head no, over and over again. The woman who had gestured at them made an unpleasant smile and gave a shrug. I'm sorry, said Topaz's mother, but I have to talk to my daughter. I can't just drag her in kicking and screaming.

Her mother looked at her with that patient, sad face that made Topaz do whatever her mother wanted, but this time Topaz looked away, so she couldn't see it. Please, dear, said her mother. You're being unreasonable, you're acting like a little child. Topaz said, I don't want anything inside my head. What about your braces? said her mother. They're in your head, aren't they? They're in my mouth, said Topaz. It's not the same. You don't want to be different, do you, Topaz? asked her mother very sadly. You don't want to be the only child in school who isn't hooked up, do you? And they'll all laugh at you. Think how you'll feel. Topaz started crying. Take me home, please, she said. I don't want anything inside my head.

You're really surprising me, said her mother. I'm surprising myself too, said Topaz, in tears, even starting to sob a little. It made her nose run. I can't help it. I don't know why, I'm sorry. There, there, said her mother,

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holding her and patting her head. Her mother then told the woman that she was sorry but it looked like they would have to reschedule. The woman said, It's not so unusual for kids to get cold feet, and she gave them a few colorful brochures. Here, she said, this provides some information. We're always afraid of what we don't know. And before they left, she put out her hand to Topaz and said, Here, look, honey, in my hand. Topaz looked and saw, in the palm of the woman's hand, a silver cylinder so tiny, it looked like part of an electronics kit, the kind Ian had on Nerol. That's a plon, said the woman. Do you want to hold it? No, thank you, said Topaz, wiping her face, and they went home.

Later that day, her mother had a serious talk with her father. Topaz heard some of it, from the next room, even though their voices were low. Her mother said: It must be difficult for the child to adjust. Think, dear, it's not just a new school and new friends, for her it's a whole new planet. It's not new to us, we grew up here, but she doesn't remember Earth. Let's not push her. Let's give her time, and all the room she needs. Her father said more than once: Fine, fine, I agree. But Topaz could tell that he wasn't pleased. He wanted his daughter to grow up more quickly than she was growing up.

Topaz felt nervous about going to school, afraid that the children and Ms. C. would know all about her cowardice at the glass building. But no one referred to it or hinted at it, so maybe they didn't know. The class had a lesson about fractions and percentages in the form of a game, where they all had to stand in different parts of the room and move around according to the numbers Ms. C. wrote on the board, and Topaz was one of the few who didn't make any mistakes. In the fenced-in park, during the lunch hour, she played the leap-frog game with Cherry and Anemone and another girl who joined them. The other girl's name was Iris.

In the afternoon, Ms. C. had a man come from an important company and tell the children about the future of compuvision. He had a wonderful voice and said that someday, and not too long, either, people wouldn't need sets to watch compuvision, they could just close their eyes and think a keyword to get a menu in their head. His company was developing a new, improved plon that would join with the plon the children already had. As the man talked, Topaz saw Iris finger her head behind an ear and a little up diagonally, and Topaz fingered her own head there and imagined the

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plon going in. It wasn't so bad, she told herself. Why was she being such a baby about such a little thing?

Lance came and talked to her again in the hall after school. She knew that he had come especially to talk to her, and she heard one of her new friends say, behind her, Look, Topaz has a boyfriend. She supposed that Lance was her boyfriend. It made her feel very grown-up. As they walked toward the upper shuttle stop together, Lance actually took her hand, maybe because of what the girl said, and Topaz let him hold it. She thought: Will he still like me when I get hooked up? Because it seemed to her that he cared about her the way people care about a person who is ill or very old or who can't see and has to get around with a white cane and one of those ear aids that make echoes. There was something nice about his caring, but at the same time there was something not nice about it.

At home, she told her mother that she was all right now about the plon and wanted to be hooked up like everyone else. Her mother nodded, not at all surprised, as if she had been expecting Topaz to change her mind, and made another appointment. To make the appointment, her mother talked into the air, not on the phone as before, so Topaz knew that their family was on the net now and that soon, after the operation, she would be able to talk to Cherry without a modem. She repeated to herself: Cherry fifty-seven Z slash two. Maybe they would play interactive games, too, in their heads together.

It was the day before her appointment, a Tuesday, in the afternoon, when the crash happened. The children were in the hall during a break, and suddenly they all fell down. Topaz got down on the floor, too, thinking that this was a new activity no one had told her about, a game or maybe a joke. Or maybe it was an earthquake drill, like the kind they had on Nerol near the equator. Topaz had seen a video once. She remembered that everyone was supposed to get under the nearest table. Once a whole town was destroyed by a quake, and the sky was purple-gray for a month after that even as far as their continent, Anglia.

The children were still, though some arms and legs were twitching a little, the way dogs do in their sleep when they have dreams. Whatever this was, it didn't seem to Topaz like a joke. After a while, she got up and went to the classroom, and there was Ms. C. on the floor by her desk. Ms. C. was twitching too. Topaz saw her teacher's eyes. They were all white.

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And there was some white on Ms. C.'s lips. That frightened Topaz, so she ran out, not stopping to get her satchel with her new art supplies from her locker.

She took the upper shuttle, which was running fine, except that the people in it were either lying on the floor or lying on their seats on top of one another. The only sound besides the humming of the shuttle was a child in the back crying. Topaz looked and saw that the child was standing and pulling on the hand of one of the people. He was a toddler, curly-haired, maybe two years old, and the fact that he wasn't lying down with everyone else frightened Topaz even more than her teacher's white eyes had, because the thought came to her, and what a cold thought it was, that she and the toddler were the only two people in the shuttle car who were not hooked up.

Topaz ran home as fast as she could from the shuttle stop near her house, past some people lying in the street or on the sidewalk. One man was on his back and had his mouth open, and his eyes were open too and didn't blink once. Help, Topaz cried, though there was no one around to help her. On Nerol there would have been police robots, and they would have come quickly to see what was the matter.

Mother, Father, she called, running in, but they weren't at home. Topaz went to phone her mother at work but couldn't find the phone, then she remembered that they didn't have a phone anymore, not needing one. I hope they're all right, she said out loud, like a prayer. She didn't know what to do. She didn't want to go back outside, where all the fallen people were. She got into her bed upstairs and pulled the covers over her head, but she felt much too nervous to keep lying there, so she got out of bed and went downstairs again.

She turned on the news on the compuvision. There was no news or any show on, just a sign that said that there had been a crash and people should wait. The system would be up momentarily. Topaz sat and stared at the screen and read it ten times, trying to figure out, from those few words, what had happened and what it meant. If the system crashed, what did that do to the people who had plons in their brains? Would they have to go to the hospital? Topaz remembered what her mother had said, that eighty-five percent of the people on Earth, maybe ninety percent, were hooked up.

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She went from room to room and looked at everything carefully, her mother's things, her father's things, the furniture, the pictures on the wall. One picture was of a state fair that Topaz had been to on Nerol when she was seven. She was smiling at the camera, as if laughing, and had her arm around a silly-looking lamb. Maybe I could curl my hair, Topaz thought, while I'm waiting. The straight-haired, pigtailed girl in the picture, Topaz at seven, seemed to be laughing at her.

Topaz looked in her mother's drawer and in the bathroom for curling things but didn't find any. Then she got the idea to play disks. She didn't really care for the games on the disks, but that would be a good way to kill time until someone came, since she didn't know how to curl her hair by herself.

She played *Life* for a while, then walked around some more and looked out different windows. She couldn't see much. From her upstairs window she could see the most: three people lying crumpled in the street, one man and two old women. The two old women were together. Perhaps they were friends or sisters.

Topaz stopped playing *Life* and played *Bucket*, until she began to get hungry. She realized that it was suppertime. Her mother and father still weren't home. Maybe the shuttle wasn't working now and they had to take the bus instead and the driver had to keep stopping to clear the people out of the way so they wouldn't be run over. Or maybe her mother and father were helping out in the crisis. Her father was good at taking charge. Topaz decided to cook herself supper. They would be pleased to see how grown-up she was, cooking for herself. She made one of the five-minute dinners, using the microwave, and was very careful not to leave a mess after she was finished. She even washed the dishes and then polished the faucet in the sink, to pass the time. She went back to the compuvision after that, but the sign on the screen was still there and nothing had changed.

She sat by herself in the living room and waited. She was learning how to wait better. She was able to sit still with folded hands for a whole hour: she timed it. She played *Bucket* some more, though she couldn't really concentrate on it, then waited some more, and finally she grew sleepy. She sighed, got into her pajamas, brushed her teeth, and went to bed. She prayed, Dear Lord, please take care of my mother and father wherever they

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are and bring them home soon. She never prayed at home, because her father didn't believe in it, but sometimes at school on Nerol, on a special occasion, there was a prayer. The Nerolians were old-fashioned about things like prayer.

The next day, Topaz had breakfast and took a shower. She cleaned her room. Once, at about ten o'clock, looking out her window, she saw someone walk past. The thin man had a funny walk, as if he needed a cane but didn't want to use one, and his clothes were dirty. Topaz knew right away that he wasn't hooked up.

On the second day, she got so good at waiting that two or three hours went by with her doing nothing, just staring at a lamp or a shelf or a corner. She wasn't even sure what she was staring at. She felt that she was asleep in a way, although she had her eyes open and wasn't in bed. She might actually have fallen asleep in the armchair that faced the door, because when the door opened, she didn't remember having heard anyone knock or ring the bell.

A man and a woman came in. Topaz P.? asked the man. Yes? said Topaz. Are my mother and father all right? They didn't come home. The woman said: Topaz, dear, pack a suitcase, I'll help you. Take a few days' worth of clothes and your favorite toys. Where are we going? asked Topaz. There's a center, said the man, for children who. He stopped on the word who and blinked, not knowing how to continue. Topaz saw that he was clumsy. His hands were too big, and his tongue got in the way of his words. The woman helped him out: There's been a big crash, Topaz. I know, said Topaz, I saw the sign on the screen. But it says momentarily, and this isn't momentarily, is it? You're right, said the woman, it's been a very big problem and it will take a while to fix, I'm afraid. Meanwhile we need to gather all the children together so we can make sure they are taken care of and have enough to eat while everything is being fixed.

Topaz said: I can cook for myself. I cleaned my room, too. That's wonderful, dear, said the woman, but we need to gather all the children, so please come with us. I'll help you pack your suitcase. The woman repeated herself a lot, Topaz saw. She asked: But what if my mother and father come home and I'm not here? We'll leave a message for them, said the woman, after thinking a bit, a message that tells them where you are.

So the woman and Topaz packed some clothes and toys. The woman

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said, Oh, what is this? Topaz said, It's a mardeb, a fossil from Nerol. They lived sixty million years ago, on the bottom of the ocean. They're not that valuable, because there are so many of them, but I like this one. The planet Nerol? asked the woman. Yes, we just moved here from there. I'm at the Franklin Child Center. I've been traveling a lot myself, said the woman, to herself more than to Topaz, and her voice sounded even sadder than the voice of Topaz's mother when she wanted you to do something you didn't want to do.

They went with the man, and got into a green van that had a sign on it that said Tandem Enterprises. There was no one else in the van but Topaz and the man and the woman. The man drove them to a gray-white building that was opposite a playing field. No one was on the playing field. Topaz saw that there weren't people anymore lying in the streets and on the sidewalks. Someone had taken them to the hospital. Topaz hoped they would be all right. Maybe the old plons had to be taken out and new ones put in. It wouldn't hurt much. Her mother said that all you needed was a local anesthetic, and maybe you'd be dizzy and have a little fever afterward. But you could take some ambulins.

The next day, Topaz met some of the other children. They assembled in the cafeteria. There was something wrong with most of them, she saw. A lot were Down children. Some talked to themselves in odd voices and swung their arms. One boy had his arm in a cast and didn't say anything. They were divided up. Topaz's group was taken to a classroom and introduced to their new teacher, Ms. G. Ms. G. was a lot like Ms. C., positive and cheerful, though she wasn't as pretty. She was fatter and had a knob on her face. Also, she didn't always know what to say. She had to keep looking at a card she held. And sometimes she swallowed hard and had to wait. But Topaz liked her because she tried hard.

Children, said Ms. G., we're going to be giving you therapy sessions. Do you know what therapy is? Therapy is something that makes you feel better. We have people who will do that with you. They've been specially trained. We'll give you some medicine, too, to feel better. It's very important to be honest about how you feel and not deny it if you feel bad. I hope you understand. It's all right to cry. Sometimes bad things make us feel bad, but we can't let it make us cry all the time, either, we have to learn to be strong.

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Topaz saw that the chairs were the same as at the Franklin Child Center. The notebooks, however, were better, newer. Her notebook didn't have any wobbly keys, and the screen was nice and clear. It had plenty of memory. One of the children behind her was moaning, but it wasn't an unhappy moaning, he was just making that noise because he didn't have all his mental capacity. That's why they hadn't hooked him up. The sound was monotonous and annoying, but Topaz didn't mind it. Actually, it made her feel comfortable, as if she was in a kind of family. She felt that she could help take care of these children, and the thought made her feel very grown-up. Her mother and father would be proud of her when they came to the school after the trouble was over. What a wonderful child we have, they would say, amazed.

The pills the children took were pale blue. After a while they made Topaz feel warm inside. They made her feel like laughing, too, but she kept the laughing feeling to herself, because something awful had happened, after all. A woman who had been specially trained took her and three other children into a therapy session in another room, and they played with dolls that fell down and didn't get up ever again. They talked about that, and how they felt about it. The woman told them how wonderfully they were doing. After the therapy session, Topaz went out to the fenced-in park and introduced herself to two girls who were standing by the fence. I'm Topaz, she said, who are you? I'm Amber, said the short girl, who had a scar on her mouth. I'm Fiona, said the fat girl, who had a big body but a small head.

Topaz took charge of them and taught them the word and leap-frog game, but Fiona couldn't jump, so Topaz taught them another game. They didn't seem to care that much for it at first, but when they warmed up, they started smiling. You look much better when you smile, she told them, using the voice the therapy woman had used to her.

In the hall, Topaz noticed that a boy was following her. She turned and asked him his name. Buck, he said. I'm Topaz, she said, and held out her hand to shake hands. Paz, he said. Topaz, she said. Paz, he repeated, and didn't shake her hand. Nice meeting you, Buck, she said and went back to her class.

Ms. G. told them a story about a princess who is put to sleep for twenty years because she was rude. She didn't tell it very well, and Topaz

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had read it before anyway in a book. When the princess wakes up, she isn't rude anymore, she's learned her lesson. Topaz didn't understand how sleep could make you polite, but she remembered her father saying that sleep was a healer. Uncle Archer slept a lot, because of his back.

The children lived together in the gray-white building opposite the playing field. The window of the room she shared with seven other children looked out on the field. It was a nice view. You could see for a long distance. She wondered when they would be allowed to play on the field. Not today, it was raining. The rain was the thing Topaz liked best about Earth. It was very gentle here and smelled good. On Nerol, the rain stung and people had to avoid it. Topaz got her roommates to help clean up the room, because it was dirty. She said, Let's make a game of it, and they did. The woman in charge of their floor was pleased with Topaz. I wish they were all like you, she said. It wasn't a very diplomatic thing to say in the presence of the other children. We'll all get better, Topaz told her.

At school the next day, Buck followed her around more, even missing a therapy session he was supposed to go to. Topaz let him carry her satchel for her, and she wiped his nose for him and tied his shoes for him. They kept getting untied. She tried to teach him how to make a knot that wouldn't come loose, but it was too much for him. Paz, he said, as if that was his only word now. She wondered if he would ever be in good enough condition to get a new plon when the new plons were ready. Maybe a plon would be invented that not only hooked you up to the net but also made you intelligent.

A man came to talk to them, from the government. He had a big nose and not much hair, and his voice was deep and scratchy, reminding Topaz of a comedian on compuvision back on Nerol. The comedian's name was Ajax. She was glad she remembered that. The man told the children about progress, that sometimes there were problems but the problems could always be solved if you used science and kept your eyes on the future. Look at all the new things we had, and every day there were more of them. The government was installing something in the net, the man told them, that would make it impossible for it to crash anymore. And if there was wrong feedback or a glitch sometimes, the man said, the thing that they were installing now would protect the people. There would be a cut-off switch in every plon. So the children should not be afraid of the net. He kept

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looking at Topaz as he talked, because she was the healthiest and best-looking and most intelligent child in the room.

Topaz thought that when she grew up, she would have a lot of responsibilities and help take care of children. Maybe she would be in charge of a child center. She would be a leader of some kind, she could see that. She would be important. People would need her, because on all of Earth there would only be a few like her: a child who hadn't been hooked up because she came from another planet and not because something was wrong with her head or her brain was damaged in some way. And when she was in charge, she would make sure that all the children didn't do exactly the same thing all the time. They wouldn't all have curly hair, and they wouldn't all play *Bucket*. Maybe the plons could be different too, and maybe there could even be different kinds of nets. It was very important, Topaz thought, for children to do different things and be different from one another. They should be like wildflowers in a field, not like a row of tulips in a fenced-in garden. That way, if something bad happened, as her father liked to say about what to do with their money, with their savings, you didn't have all your eggs in one basket.

Topaz turned and looked at Buck. He needed the drool on his chin wiped. While the man from the government talked in his deep, scratchy voice, Topaz took out a tissue, half-got out of her seat to reach Buck's desk, and wiped the drool away. Paz, he said.

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Michael Nethercott lives in Vermont and works as a performing clown and organizer of theatrical events. His poems and scripts have appeared in a variety of publications for young readers, such as Cobblestone, Hopscotch, *and* Plays—The Drama Magazine for Young People. *His first story for us, written in response to his brother's scholarly interest in H. P. Lovecraft, unforgettably commingles humor and horror.*

The Beastly Red Lurker

A Gothic Excess

By Michael Nethercott

IT WAS SOME THREE YEARS ago that I first became acquainted with Heywood Mudcatt of Tattermore. We were both attending a dinner party at the home of D_____ and fell into conversation concerning heat boils (a subject of which I possess some knowledge accounted for by my years in the Gobi). For half an hour we amused ourselves with an exchange of boil-lore, then the dinner bell sounded and we took our places at the table.

The meal, as I remember, was a splendid spread, radiating outward from the central main dish of wild duck. With much passion, all members of the party embarked upon the consumption of that drool-inspiring banquet. All, that is, save Mudcatt, who merely folded his arms and smiled. His plate sat unfulfilled, brightly naked and vaguely disturbing.

Our hosts seemed unconcerned with Mudcatt's abstinence. I leaned over to D_____ and whispered, "Doesn't the man eat?"

"What? Oh, Mudcatt," D_____ shrugged. "No, as a matter of fact he doesn't. Not in public, at any rate. Some gastronomic malady, I believe. He *is* a queer rotter."

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Unaware of our whisperings, Mudcatt continued to just sit there and smile and eat nothing.

Over the next two years, I crossed paths with Mudcatt on several occasions, usually at dinner parties. Through these random encounters, I grew to actually like the fellow. His wit was of an excellent degree and his knowledge was not limited to boils. Indeed, he could discourse on a sparkling array of subjects — ice cubes, masking tapes, pygmy architecture, nasal hygiene — the man was an encyclopedia with limbs.

And yet...and yet....

When the dinner bell pealed and the assemblage sat down to eat, I would look over at that empty disk of porcelain and at Mudcatt's folded arms and unslumping smile, and I would feel my entire being tingle with something unexplainable, something uneasy, something like...was it dread?

Still, I enjoyed the man's company and when, last winter, I received a written invitation to visit Mudcatt at his estate, I accepted. What struck me as singular about the invitation was that it was for dinner. Dinner! Would I then get to see a fork lifted to that virgin smile? Would there be food upon that fork and, if so, of what nature would it be? How, for the Love of God, did Heywood Mudcatt take his nourishment? I was soon to find out.

I showed up at Tattermore Estate close to dinnertime. I was received by a wizened stick-figure of a butler who led me to a comfortable drawing room, then departed to notify his master of my arrival. Mudcatt soon joined me and furnished me with some praiseworthy brandy, though he himself did not drink any. We chatted for a while about shoe polish and clothespins. As always, Mudcatt's observations were dazzling.

"It seems to me," he remarked, "that 'shoe polish' is an unearned bit of nomenclature for a substance which, as far as I can tell, does precious little toward the outcome of a decently polished shoe. Why, if it were not for the grace of human motivation, the so-called 'polish' would languish uselessly in its tin or, at best, lie caked upon the surface of a shoe like some vile layer of excrement."

"Hear, hear!" I cried. The man was, unquestionably, brilliant.

The dinner bell rang. The bell. Was it my imagination or did that particular bell ring longer than any dinner bell I had ever heard? In point

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of fact, it did not ring — it tolled. My blood went thin. I was seized by a sense of keen apprehension. What nameless repast awaited me in Mudcatt's mysterious dining chamber?

"Come," he said. "It's time to eat."

As if in a daze, I followed my host toward destiny.

When I set eyes upon the dinner table, an audible sigh gushed out of me. There was nothing at all dreadful about the meal awaiting us; on the contrary, it was a swell spread. Turkey, ham, and fish, encampments of steaming vegetables and mounds of fresh fruit all lay sprawled out tastefully, invitingly, upon a white linen tablecloth. Candles in brass holders completed the effect.

We were seated by the narrow butler, and I was served wine. Mudcatt said a few words, *sotto voce,* to the old man, who gave a meager bow and left the room. My host smiled at me.

"Well, dig in, my friend."

I complied, heaping my plate with healthy portions of each dish. I was delighted, not to say amazed, to see Mudcatt doing the same. In fact, by the time he had finished serving himself, his plate was almost lost beneath a pyramid of food.

I began to laugh....

"My dear Mudcatt! I must say, it is a relief to see such evidence of your appetite. I was beginning to think...well, who knows what I thought. I'm just glad to see you have a bit of the glutton in you."

Mudcatt gave a chuckle. His fork and knife were now in his hands. I was reaching for my own fork when the butler re-entered.

I froze. My eyes widened and my jaw dropped like a meteor. A geyser of terror came shooting up from my lower abdomen to the roof of my head. Cradled there in the spindly arms of the old servant was a monstrously huge bottle filled to the top with a foul red substance.

Mudcatt was grinning demoniacally.

"You see, I like ketchup...."

My heart missed a beat.

"On everything!" He began to cackle.

Staggering under the weight of the bottle, the old scarecrow approached his master. Mudcatt screwed off the cap and the servant tipped the lip over the pyramid of food. My mind reeled with inconceivable

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horror as the loathsome red ketchup oozed ravagingly over Mudcatt's plate. Like some reprobate abomination, Mudcatt plunged his knife and fork into the vile, hellish corruption that was his dinner. He plugged his mouth with the hideous food-sludge and, upon devouring the unutterable contents of his plate, he abandoned his cutlery and thrust his arm into the terrible neck of the ungodly bottle. He began feeding directly on the ghastly condiment.

At this point I bolted.

I ran frantically through the house searching for the elusive front door. When I glanced behind, I saw Mudcatt and the butler, smeared in red, climbing over furniture in their diabolic pursuit of me. The pair looked far less human now — I saw them for what they were. They were in appearance something like foul, diseased earthworms with huge hellborn mandibles that dripped perversion as they moved. The whole scene was one of indescribable horror, so indescribable that I must resort to long, ornate, vague descriptions that, in truth, describe nothing, but leave the reader with a fiendish, watery, repulsive impression of many hideous syllables.

I found the door and made my escape.

It has been over a year since that damnable evening. Mudcatt has vanished from society and I, for the most part, am a hermit, shunning the company of my fellows.

On occasion, if energetically pressed, I may attend a dinner, but even then, even then, I do not eat. I fold my arms and smile, but I do not eat.

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For a period in the 1980s, after One Hundred Years of Solitude *and* Love in the Time of Cholera *found widespread popularity in English, it seemed as though every fantasy writer in North America was claiming to write magical realism. At the time, I thought the trend just demonstrated the dangers of pigeonholing fiction: not only was the claim of "American magical realist" inappropriate in many circumstances, but I found that its application sometimes made me* less *interested in a particular work. It was almost as if a friend had swapped his jeans-and-t-shirt outfit for a silk cravat and ill-fitting gabardine slacks and then expected people to look at him the same way.*

But here we have a fantasy that clearly shows the influence of Márquez, a lovely tale of sexual roles and lepidoptera. This story is M. Rickert's first published work of fiction.

The Girl Who Ate Butterflies

By M. Rickert

I

HER MOTHER CARVED ANGELS in the backyard. The largest was six feet tall and had the face of her mother's first lover, killed in a car accident when they were still in their teens. It took eighteen months to sway the purple and blue webbed stone into wings and skin, to release the wisp of feathers from the metallic clasp. She carved through the seasons, the easy spring, the heat of summer. In autumn she moved closer to the garage and plugged in the space heater, and in winter she wiped the white ash, that was what she called it, from his broad shoulders and unformed brow and in fingerless gloves carved him with a heat that flushed her cheeks and brightened her eyes.

The smallest angel was no larger than Lantanna's pinky and it was for the memory of an aborted fetus. Lantanna had heard the woman whisper her request through the closed door on a dark and moonless night. "I know I made the right decision," she said, "but still, I feel empty. I want something to mark the absence. A little angel for the one I sent past. Can

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you carve it a girl? Can you make her face at peace?" Lantanna stood shivering in the kitchen doorway, unnoticed by her mother who listened with a passive expression to the stranger behind the door. "And one last thing?" whispered the voice. "As you carve will you say a prayer, or whatever, for me. Though I'm sure I made the right choice."

Lantanna turned and walked back to bed. She shivered into her blankets and wrapped them around herself, tight as a cocoon, and fell asleep again without her mother even noticing she had awakened. In her home, as in her life, Lantanna, like a shadow, was rarely noticed.

She was the sort of girl who did not know she was pretty. A pale face with the lightest scattering of freckles on her nose and cheeks. Pale blue eyes the color of dreams. Hair the color of corn.

She wore summer dresses of the nineteen-forties (regardless of the season) thirty years after that time, but unmended and clean as if they had never been worn before. She also wore a slip which was also not the fashion. The dresses were airy as wings, so thin that the slip straps with paper clip-looking adjusters could be seen through them, as well as the flower at her chest, a squashed tiny pink or white or yellow rose. In the winter she wore little sweaters, the kind with three-quarter length sleeves and pearl buttons, while the other students at Oakdale High were ripping their jeans and rubbing their new sneakers in dirt. She was pretty but not fashionably so. Hardly anyone noticed. Really, only one.

Quetzl lived in Oakdale in the summer with his father who worked in the city and provided little supervision or restraint. A rare, dark-skinned creature in the town of apple-white, he spent the summers playing his guitar and smoking pot. He watched Lantanna from a distance, first as something vaguely noticed, a blur of color in a vision of black and white, then, with more focus, as she took her daily stroll early each morning past his house, always and mysteriously (in that age when most moved in packs) alone. "She's a space cadet," his friend Emma told him once when she saw him watching Lantanna. But he watched with growing fascination because in the dull, same-paced world of Oakdale, Lantanna was different, and because he was different too, he recognized her as one of his kind.

The day it began Lantanna went to her mother with blood-stained panties. Her mother looked up from the dusty white chiseling to say,

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"This is the blood of a broken heart all women suffer. It is inevitable. Wounds must bleed." Then, when Lantanna began to cry, scolded, "You should be happy. This is good. You will live a long, pain-filled life."

She showed Lantanna the box of tampons and demonstrated how to use them, watching as she did, tapping her fingers to get back to her work. Lantanna inserted the thin white cardboard-sheathed cotton with a stab of discomfort and in a tremulous voice asked if she was still a virgin. Yes, yes, her mother nodded. "Though it doesn't matter. Time is relative. After all," she said, "you already have the wound."

Following her mother's instructions, Lantanna washed the blood from her fingers and panties with cold water and yellow soap. By the time she left for her morning walk, her mother was back in the yard absorbed with angel and stone. Lantanna walked past in silence, absorbed in her own study of astral realities. What, she wondered, made true angel wings? Were they gossamer and thinner than glass like butterflies' wings, or were they heavy with flesh and feathers, coursed with veins and blood?

She did not notice Quetzl following her. And he, so absorbed in the swing of her pale pink dress, the arch of her long legs to the drop of short white slip, did not realize Emma followed him, her eyes glinting with fire.

When Lantanna got to the meadow she walked into the tall grass and lay down. Quetzl stopped at the edge of the meadow and lay down too. At some distance, Emma stood in the shadow of trees that bordered the meadow.

Lantanna lay still. Her arms raised. Her hands like little white stars fallen into the grass. He could only see moments of her face. A small butterfly flitted in the bush nearby, but she did not turn her head or move, only lay there as still and disinterested as a flower. More butterflies flitted nearby. A small orange one lit on her wrist. A tiny blue hovered at her lips but he blinked and in that moment it was gone. Passion rose in him like Jesus's winged heart in the picture over his grandmother's bed.

From her distance it is as if Emma is suddenly sainted, a person who sees spirits and changes in the soul. Seeing nothing that can be described like this, she knows Quetzl has fallen in love with Lantanna. She feels a particular response in her own chest. An expansion of desire, the way flame swells to explode.

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Lantanna, in the meadow, knows nothing of those who watch. Lying in the grass, her white arms extended like stems her hands flower, her little mouth open with one small lilac bloom on her tongue, parched to swallow, dry in the hot sun, her heart beats like the quick wings of the sleepy orange that flits about her and finally lights on her wrist. A small blue hovers at her lips, darts in and out, in a maddening tease before it rests on the lilac bloom. Quickly, she closes her mouth, tastes the fluttering wings. She chews and hears the vaguest crunch of its small body and, treasuring its quick flavor minced with the lilac, swallows. Sighing, she lets her tired arms fall. Eyes closed, she feels the hot sun, the vague itch of meadow grass, hears the insect hum. But the pulse of her heart is the loudest and most vibrant sensation, as if it is filled with all the butterflies she's swallowed since she was a little girl. Wings beating in a blood cocoon. Bursting to be free.

WHEN LANTANNA rises from the meadow grass and turns to walk home, Quetzl follows. But Emma does not follow them. She waits until they are out of sight and then walks to the meadow which is bright at the edge of summer with wild flowers and butterflies, alive with an energy she can describe with only one metaphor. Emma stands at the edge of the meadow, at just about the spot, she estimates, Quetzl lay in. Where the grass looks flattened she bends to touch it, as if it is a holy space, as if by placing her palm where he lay she can touch him. She closes her eyes. Yes, she thinks, she can feel his heat. Then, she lies there too, turns her head to see his vision through the grass, the spear of blades at crosshatch, the flitting of colors, wings and petals. Here, she knows, he lay and watched Lantanna. Lantanna! Emma rises quickly when she realizes she has been lying in the meadow just like that space cadet. She forgives Quetzl for this. He is bewitched, it is obvious. Everyone knows Lantanna comes from a family of witches.

Emma comes from a family of fire fighters. Her father was a volunteer fireman for the Oakdale Fire Department before he mysteriously disappeared on his way to work two years ago. Almost exactly two years ago, Emma thinks. She remembers the hot tears, the new pain in her mother's eyes. She remembers the first realization of the woman's disappearance

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that same morning. She wished, for a long time after, that she had paid her more attention. She remembers a vague slash of red lips, dark hair, heavy perfume in church. But she cannot remember more than this. At this point, she can barely remember him.

Emma reaches in her pocket. She pulls out the lighter. She flicks the top with her thumb, expertly. Emma has a secret. She is the girl who loves fire. She used to start fires to make her father come. No matter what time of day or night, how impossible it was for him to be home for supper, how terribly too tired he was for her or her mother, if there was a fire, he was there. Vibrant. Heroic. She used to watch in awe this strange aspect of him, the strength of his stance, the sternness of his face, his power. Now Emma reaches down. With a quick movement she brushes the flame across the grass in front of her. It sizzles, small as a stitch, but she watches it grow in the tangle of grass. She runs quickly to the edge of woods as the smoke and flame rise behind her, like phantom snakes and devils' tongues.

She runs to the trees at the edge of the meadow and climbs one. The bark scratches her fingers and she tears a pant leg in her rush. But she barely notices such minor pain. Though it has been two years since he left them, it is at moments like these that she feels closest to her father. There is the same rush of excitement, the same heat of anticipation that used to bring him. Now she can relish the feeling. It is almost like having him back again. The meadow burns. A late afternoon breeze pushes it farther. Emma feels the sting of smoke in her eyes. Strains to hear the sound of sirens. Emma climbs higher. She can see the dirt street, the distant houses. Fire snakes through the grass below. Her eyes sting. Her throat tightens. Even the tree is hot. She feels the pores of her skin open and tears weep out. Her hands tighten to hold the limb, her fingers strain like bird claws, the bones pressed against the skin. Smoke fills her lungs with pain. The flames reach for her. She screams. She feels she screams but she hears no sound other than fire.

Suddenly. He is there, in his suspenders and baggy yellow fire pants. He stands at the edge of the limb. Graceful as a star balanced on its point. He is saying her name over and over again. Emma, Emma, Emma. He extends one hand to her; with the other, he parts the sky. She can see just past him a blue and gentle day at the edge of summer. "Emma, Emma,"

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he says. "Come." She stands. She stretches her hand to touch his. The limb creaks. "Come," he says. He parts the smoke and flame with one hand. Reaches for her with the other. She strains to touch him. She hears a sound like a branch breaking and suddenly she is falling. Falling. On fire. Where? In the blur of heat and pain she forms this final thought. Where? Where are you now?

II

It is a long winter. It snows every day and the air is brittle. When the sun shines, it sharpens the points of ice that hang from the eaves like daggered teeth.

Lantanna's mother carves a graveyard angel for the girl who died in the fire. She thinks Emma and Lantanna were friends because of the way Lantanna cried and cried. She wept for days and nights. She would eat nothing but tears.

Lantanna's mother tried to comfort her. "You have to stop crying. You have to make the decision. Death is inevitable," she said. "Joy is not. You have to choose."

Of course there had been other winters. Long months when the meadow was frozen and the butterflies gone. Lantanna suffered through those other winters but only by counting the full moons until summer. Now, she cannot count, for she does not know when the meadow will be alive again.

Quetzl sends her letters. Many, many letters. He writes of beauty, desire, and loss. He wrote, "The lesson of the fire is that we must accept we all burn. I burn for you. I go to sleep with the memory of your eyes. Do they remember me?"

Only vaguely. She had been surprised when, on that last summer day, he had come up from somewhere behind her on the path and introduced himself. He had begun speaking strangely almost immediately. He told her he had been watching her. Then he said he would make her a light lunch of butterfly pasta.

But of course, it wasn't butterflies at all, only bow-shaped pasta sprinkled with parmesan and melted butter, and she did not even taste it, because the fire engines screamed past and she looked down the road in

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the direction they traveled and saw that the sky was a bright orange of fluttering blues and wings and she knew that the meadow was on fire. Of course they wouldn't let her near it. She heard them talking about a body, whom she later learned was the girl, Emma. Whenever Lantanna tried to picture Emma, even after she saw her face in the newspaper, she could only hold the image for a fleeting moment. It was true, she was haunted. But not by the death of Emma.

At night she dreamt the fluttering of wings brushed her cheeks and teased her lips.

And it was strange, in the way that strange things happen, that just when she was at her worst, suffering the despair of what was lost from her life forever (some things should be certain, an appetite fed, for instance) that, though she had not answered a single letter, Quetzl came to her, knocking at the door in the midst of another winter storm. He found her wan and pale, shivering in her too thin dress. She invited him in and brought him to warm by the fire but he could see that she was suffering, and of course his love sank to the depths of her despair, and he felt it within him, in the place where Emma died, a greater widening of the emptiness. He implored her to eat and removed from his knapsack a bruised peach, a flattened sandwich, a brown spotted banana, but she wanted none of it. In desperation he moved her closer to the flame where he discovered he could see, not just through the thin fabric of her pale yellow dress to the wisp of shape beneath, but through her skin to the blue course of veins and delicate bones.

He found Lantanna's mother in the garage, huddled near the space heater, carving an angel who looked vaguely familiar. He watched for a long time her intense carving, before he approached, saying, "You give more attention to this statue than you do your own daughter." At which she did not pause but continued to carve, the scrape of metal against stone shrill to his ears. "Did you hear me?" he asked.

"I heard you."

"Well?" he said. "What kind of mother are you? Can't you see what's happening?"

At this the woman laughed. "I see what's happening," she said. "You're happening. And if she can survive you, perhaps she'll live."

"Survive me?" Quetzl sputtered indignantly. "I love her."

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"You destroy her."

"I save her," he said, and then turned on his heels, muttering, "Standing here talking to a crazy old witch," he walked out of the garage into the storm.

That night he returned with a car and took Lantanna and a suitcase he directed her to pack and drove through the white snow sifting the sky, soft as petals. "Where are we going?" she asked, suddenly aware that she was confused.

"Mexico," he said.

"But why?"

She slept. When she woke, it was light. He offered her a hamburger and this she refused but she ate some of the lettuce and the tomato so he was pleased. The stars were white-bright, intense. She slept. When she woke again a hot sun followed them. Her cheeks were wet, and she sniffed at her own scent, salty, musty. He drove with a grim resolve, stopping to piss, to kiss her mouth that she was embarrassed tasted of her own bad breath. "Mexico?" she said and he shrugged his shoulders and nodded as if, yes, it was strange, but somehow inevitable. "Why, we're driving into summer," she said. At night they slept in rest stops where she washed her armpits, and feet, and crotch, and wet a comb through her hair, and still she felt wild somehow and could not wash or neaten the feeling away. She'd squint into the dimpled mysterious rest stop mirrors and try to see the change reflected there, the strange strength that grew inside her, and she looked at his face and came to believe she saw it in his profile too. Wild. Free.

When they got to the border there was a wait of traffic and it was the first time she entered another country and she did not know it would be so much like an amusement park. Tijuana was strange, bright with color and cheap, but he kept driving past chain link fences with holes cut out of them that marked the border, past cardboard-and-tire shacks with the blue light of a TV inside, past the fish stands, and women with babies begging. He stopped only to look at the map and she began to think that this was not love, not love at all, but some sort of obsession until just then he said, "We're here. I think." But it was dark and so they slept until morning showed them the edge of the jungle and they followed the strange trail she could not object to because it was inevitable until at last they

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stood at the top of the hill and he waved his hand across the expanse of valley below. "Here," he said, "I give you this." She had to squint and not really look at all before she saw that the spotted trees quivered with red and black wings, thousands and thousands, so what could she do but walk into them? They lit on her, in her hair, on her hands. They fluttered against her skin. "Monarchs," she said.

"Yes," he said. "For you."

"Monarchs," she said again.

"Because you love them."

Monarchs flitted against her skin and hair. Each touch reminded her of the loss.

"Now you see how I love you," he said. "I left home. I stole the car. I did everything for you. Because I know you miss the butterflies. I would do anything for you. I would die for you."

"But...." She could not continue. She saw the bright light in his eyes and could not cast it out with the venomous truth. He saw the tears in her eyes and mistook them for joy. He broke the distance between them and kissed her with the passion of a thousand wings, of an exile, of an appetite starved.

She returned the kiss with her own pain. Poisonous. All these butterflies, she thought, and not one of them edible. His tongue fluttered in her mouth. She had to concentrate not to bite down. He pressed against her. His hot hands on her thighs, her panties stretched tight as his fingers wiggled inside, eager, one tip, wet, there. She groaned. His other hand pushed the panties down. Yes, why not? she thought. Anything, anything to stop the sound of wings.

"Oh, Lantanna," he said. "I will love you forever."

But this she could not believe. Even as she lay on the jungle ground, monarchs fluttering against her skin and brushing her hands, even as she arched to meet the stab of pleasure, even later in the car where it happened again, and at the rest stops, beneath the desert stars, even as he risked arrest to drive her home because she missed her mother, even though she knew he meant to, she also knew he could not love her forever, for he did not love her now, not really. Not knowing her secret, not understanding her appetite, how could she believe he loved her at all?

* * *

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III

When they returned to Oakdale, Quetzl was arrested. They talked of arresting Lantanna but Quetzl said that she did not know he'd stolen the car. Lantanna did not want to go to prison so she did not argue for truth.

Winter melted. Quetzl wrote to Lantanna every day. Every day she read his mysterious, passionate letters and wept.

Finally, she took the bus and hitchhiked to the county jail.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"I took the bus and hitchhiked," she said.

"I don't want you hitchhiking," he said. "It's dangerous."

"Anyway," she said, to change the subject.

"No. Not anyway. I'll end this visit," he said, "if you don't promise. Promise me you will not hitchhike again."

"Quetzl."

"Promise."

"You're not understanding."

"What am I not understanding? I love you. I want you safe."

"No," Lantanna said. "That's not what I mean. What you don't understand is I won't promise you anything. I am not the one," she said. "You need me. Let's just be clear about this. You need me. And I don't need you. So don't make threats that hurt only yourself."

Quetzl waved for the guard.

Dear Lantanna,

Yes. I need you. Beautiful, beautiful girl. I love you. I need you for your beauty. Your love of beauty. Come visit. Tell me you love me. I live to hear you say it. I would do anything for you. I would die for you. But I don't want you to die for me. I just want you to be safe. Come back to me. I love you. I love you. I love you. Say it.

The second visit.

"How did you get here?" he asks.

"I took the bus and hitchhiked," she says.

"I just want you to be safe."

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"How can you love me," she says, "if you don't believe I want the same thing for myself?"

"Lantanna, I love you. Tell me what you want. Tell me what will make you love me."

"Well," she says, "that's a start. Finally, you ask. There are things about me. Things you do not even guess. I have many secrets and there is one that really matters. I've never shared it with anyone. I've never known anyone who would understand."

"Yes. Me. I love you. You can tell me anything."

"This I have to show you."

"Then show me."

"I can't show you here."

"Will you wait for me?"

"How can I answer? How can I know?"

SEVERAL NIGHTS later she is awakened. "Quetzl?"

"I escaped," he says. "But they'll find me. They'll come here. We have to go."

"What?" she says. "Is this your gift to me? I don't want to go to prison for helping you escape."

"No, no. Didn't I tell you?" He sits beside her on the bed. He grabs her arm and she feels the pulse and weight of his passion. "You never wrote, you only visited twice, and when you came we fought. I have this all planned. You tell them I kidnapped you. If we are caught you tell them that. See, I have this rope. Let me tie you up."

"You must think I am really stupid."

"Lantanna," he begs. "Trust me. All I've ever done is love you. I am here because I love you. I escaped so you could show me your secret."

"It's not here," Lantanna says. "It's not in this room." She sees now that he is sweating. She sees fear in his eyes.

"Lantanna, please."

It isn't that she really believes he loves her but because she hopes he does, that she agrees. He ties her wrists to the bedposts. She watches his profile as he does. So serious in his work he does not seem to notice her. With the final knot he kisses her. "I won't do this, if you don't want me to," he says as he lifts her thin nightgown.

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When he kisses her, she kisses back. It is wonderful, she thinks, to only lie there. He is hungry. It has been a long time and she knows about appetites. He is touching her everywhere. As if his hands had wings. She closes her eyes and tries to feel only these feelings and forget, for a while, the longing, the empty hunger, her own appetite.

Afterward, he takes the silver scissors shaped like a bird from her dresser and saws through the rope. It dangles on the posts and the loops bracelet her wrists. When they stand up together there is a wet spot exposed on the bed. "That's good," he says. "It looks like I raped you."

It is getting light. They sneak down the stairs together as if Lantanna lived in a house with the sort of parent who would interfere.

She takes him down the path, past his father's house, past the burnt trees of last summer's fire, to the meadow which is stubby as a bad haircut but sprite with flowers.

"I didn't know it would grow back so quickly," he says.

She lies down. She ignores him. He finds this moving, that she has let him in so close now that he can see what she is alone. She picks a bud and puts it in her mouth. He is fascinated. This small gesture he had not seen before. She raises her arms, the knotted rope bracelets her wrists, her hands are like little white stars fallen into the meadow grass. The early morning strengthens with heat. He is restless. But she is still and he has learned patience from her stillness.

Finally, a very small yellow butterfly begins to flit about. It lands on the rope.

He thinks, This beautiful girl.

It flits around her lips.

Beautiful, beautiful.

It lands on the bud in her mouth.

Beauti —

She snaps her mouth shut. Chews. Swallows. She looks at him.

He looks at her.

She covers her face with her hands, like a child, as if by not seeing him she disappears. When she removes them, he is still watching her. She cannot bear what she sees. She closes her eyes.

"Go away," she says.

"I can help you."

"No. Go away."

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"But I love you," he says.

She looks at him.

"Really," he says.

"And this?" she gestures toward her mouth.

"I'll help you," he says. "I'll stick by you while you work it out."

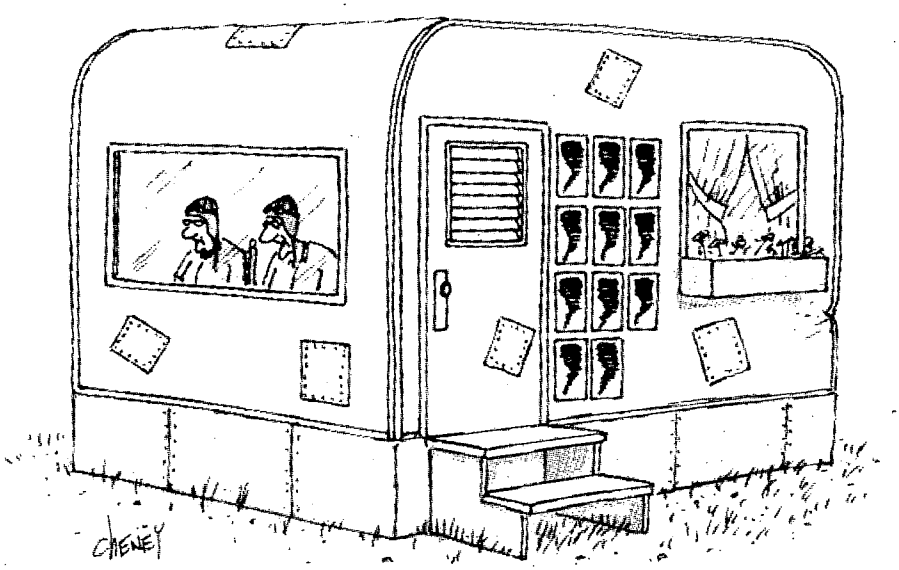
"This is not a problem," she says. "This is my appetite."

He bends to kiss her, but just above her mouth, hesitates.

"Don't worry," she says, "they don't fly back out."

She closes her eyes. For a long time the only sound is the scrying of bugs. Then she hears the sound of his feet like a scythe, cutting through the meadow grass.

Now, everything is different. She does what she has never done before. She picks another bud. Places it in her mouth. Today she will eat until she has had enough. A small blue flits about. She waits. Waits. Waits. It lands on her tongue. Wings fluttering. She bites. In the distance, she hears sirens. Chews. Yes, everything is different now. Swallows. It even tastes different. It tastes better. ☙



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For those of you who have wondered about the recent absence of Marc Laidlaw's fiction from our pages, here at last is the answer. Two or three years ago, the prolific Mr. Laidlaw moved to Seattle and turned his talents to creating computer games. (In fact, if you look closely in the bestseller Half-Life, *you'll spot a copy of Marc's novel* The 37th Mandala *in Freeman's locker.)*

Our loss is their gain. But if this new story is any indication, Marc's current line of work is not all fun and games...

Total Conversion

By Marc Laidlaw

ON HIS WAY HOME FROM CompUSA with the latest overdrive processor and another 128 megs of RAM chips in the tiny trunk of his Alfa Romeo, Barton Needles cruised slowly past the high school and gazed through the chainlink fence at his so-called peers. It was a scene that should have set him tingling with nostalgia, like something out of a PG-13 teen romance movie: sociable kids taking lunch in the quadrangle, running laps on the track, throwing themselves at football dummies, laughing and shouting. But as the bell rang, calling the students back to classes, Barton mouthed the word "Losers," and stepped on the gas.

At home, he slung his backpack under the computer desk and nudged the mouse to kill the screensaver, which played continuous looped demos of his personal online *Gorefest* victories. A dozen e-mails sprang onto the screen, all received since that morning. He idly scrolled and deleted with one hand while gnawing at a tortilla smeared with peanut butter and jelly — he needed fuel before getting to work under the hood.

There were three messages from GoreX: more optimistic notes on

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business plans and the revised royalty offer for the *Skullpulper* total conversion. Total bullshit was more like it. He would never work for them again, despite the latest personal pleading e-mail from Tom Ratchip, GoreX's owner: "Bart, I am asking you as a friend and as your biggest fan to please reconsider your unreasonable position."

It took him about five seconds to type in, one-fingered, "TTML, AW" and sent the message. *Talk To My Lawyer, Ass-Wipe.* In other words, his dad.

Ironically, Ratchip had forwarded a handful of semiliterate messages from delirious gamers, praising *Skullpulper* in what passed for gushing flattery. "wOOpee! Man thass kewl!" "Barton Needles is GOD!" "wtf is Needles doin workin on TCs? IMHO he shud have have his own fkn company — and prolly will!"

My sentiments exactly, Barton thought; and how odd of Tom to send that one along. He "prolly" thought it was magnanimous of him.

He deleted the fan transmissions as fast as he could scan them, holding back only on the last message, caught by its surprisingly formal structure — not to mention the absence of spelling errors.

> With stunning architecture, fantastic textures, terrifying new monsters and brilliant new skins for existing monsters, everything about *Skullpulper* is an improvement on the original game. This is the best Total Conversion we have seen of any game. Given that it is a TC of *Gorefest,* the reigning blockbuster, this means that *Skullpulper* is now the best 3D game in the world. Period.

Barton leaned a bit closer to the screen, cramming the last of the tortilla into his mouth. Was this an advance review? — something from an upcoming issue of *PC Gamer,* maybe?

Then he saw that it hadn't been forwarded from GoreX after all. The return address read simply: "*n01@noware.org.*" Mildly weird. Orgs were generally, what, nonprofit groups, religious institutions, stuff like that? The thought of a *Skullpulper* fan heading up an organized religion was amusing. Like getting fanmail from the Pope.

He continued scrolling through the letter, but the praise of *Skullpulper* was confined to one paragraph. The next one was far more intriguing:

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Because of your obvious brilliance, Mr. Needles, we are writing to inquire as to your team's availability for another total conversion project.

My team, he thought. *That would be me, myself and I.*

We have acquired from a third party developer the code to what we consider an extraordinary game. The original program has never been released, and due to legal complications cannot be published or otherwise distributed in its current form. While the source code may not be altered in any manner, we believe that would make your task all the easier. You need not concern yourself with programming or behavior issues, but merely convert the outward appearance of existing game elements. We believe you could accomplish this quite rapidly, and we are prepared to pay extremely well for your services. If you would kindly respond to this e-mail with a simple affirmation (and the appropriate information regarding your financial institution), we will be delighted to demonstrate our intentions by immediate electronic deposit of a one-third advance into any account you specify. Once you have verified the availability of the funds and consented to this project, we will forward everything you need to commence the conversion. You may use your own utilities if you prefer; but we will provide all textures, skins, and entity models for conversion. You may work independently and at your own speed (keeping in mind that time is of the essence), transferring files to us only when you are pleased with them. We will compile the files and, of course, take full responsibility for the ultimate conversion.

Barton was sitting down by the time he'd read this far. Could this be real money? The GoreX boys were a bunch of cheapshit assholes. The artists and programmers were okay, but a bunch of suits had taken over the company since he'd first agreed to do the conversion, and they had done nothing but try to chisel him down and cheat him out of a profit from the moment they'd realized they had a wildfire hit on their hands — something that might give the original game, *Gorefest,* a run for its money.

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If these Noware people were serious, he was prepared to put together something that would blow away even *Skullpulper*. It would be supremely satisfying to snatch the ground out from GoreX.

He'd have to top himself, work harder than he had on *Skullpulper*, and of course it all depended on the raw materials he had to work with. He couldn't imagine how some nonprofit organization had come up with decent code — let alone code competitive with what was already on the market — but they seemed serious. No harm in seeing how serious.

Barton composed a one-letter reply — "Y" — and regretted having to mar its perfect symmetry by appending his clunky account information.

At 4:17 he sent the message. At 4:26, when he walked back into his room, gouging a cold spoon into a pint of espresso ice cream, a reply was waiting in the mailbox: *"Electronic deposit complete."*

Was this for real? No organization worked that fast. There were committees, accountants, people who filled out the requests and submitted them to others who had authority, and on and on.

He connected to his bank. Checking deposits. There was something new, today's date, timeclocked at 4:22 p.m.

At first the amount itself didn't register. Until he saw the dollar sign in front of it, he thought it was his account number. It had almost that many digits.

"Well, the money's clear, but I can't get a lead on these Noware people," his father announced the next evening over dinner.

"Keep trying," Barton instructed. "I'll start work on the TC. Put that money somewhere nice and warm where it can breed. I won't touch it yet. I'll be too busy. This is the last sit-down dinner I'll be eating with you two for a while."

"What about school?" his mother asked. "Have you given any thought to going back?"

"Did you see the size of that deposit?" his father asked. "At this point, for what Barton wants to do, school has become irrelevant."

"This conversation has become irrelevant," Barton said, pushing away from the table.

He went to his room and organized his desk to the tune of explosions and screams from *Gorefest* battles. He meant to replace the screensaver

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with a *Skullpulper* deathmatch, but so far he hadn't done much online battling in his own game. The TC had only been available for a week; he'd been busy.

He decided that before beginning on the Noware project, he would treat himself to one last *Skullpulper* battle — one that would leave his name ringing in the ears of the Pulper community. It was time to liquefy a few skulls.

He pulled on his Intraspexion 3D goggles and connected to GoreWorld, the network of servers dedicated to endless *Gorefest* and *Skullpulper* online wars. It took about a second to find a battle in progress; he mouse-clicked on a maelstrom icon and was sucked right in.

"Lord Needles enters fray," said a little voice in the headset, barely audible above the screams of his first victim. He was in the best of his own deathmatch levels, "The Killing Floor" — three stories of metal ramps and catwalks with adjoining corridors that wove in and out of each other. The Killing Floor was a Möbius strip, a hollow hypercube; you could walk through a gate at one end of a room and find yourself coming in at the far side of the same room. There were ten players already in the map, and as soon as news spread that Lord Needles had jumped in, the number of players joining from other sites began to soar. It topped at thirty-six — the max limit for this level — and by then things were getting crowded.

Lord Needles cleared the mob as fast as it respawned.

From his first victim — a startled blur of neon colors with a human face, quickly transformed into beautifully rendered chunks of flying meat — he had liberated a stomp-gun and an ammo pack. As orange streaks of firebolts began to seek him on his ledge, he spied a lift just rising past. He leapt aboard, riding the platform two levels up, clearing catwalks of upright figures and strewing the room with a rain of bloody meat.

Within seconds he had the high-ground. A Tesla-cannon floated in midair, just out of reach, but for Lord Needles it was money in the bank. A normal jump would fall short, and leave you plunging to the Killing Floor below, which rippled periodically with gnashing spikes as the walls closed in and caught anyone not fortunate enough to have rocket-jumped onto a ledge. Lord Needles turned his back to the gun, slid until his heels were at the edge of empty air, then fired the stomper at the nearest wall. The recoil blew him backward, all the way across the gap; in midflight,

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with a clang, he snagged the Tesla, then came down smack on a suit of glowing armor that snapped into place around him. He held his fire until the level was full again, crawling with gamers hoping for a shot at him. They'd all go to bed happy tonight, bragging of how they'd actually been reduced to ground-round by Lord Needles himself.

The world is good, he thought. *This one, anyway.*

"Who's building your levels?" he queried n01. "If you want an exciting, comprehensive package, full of traps and murderous surprises, I'm a skilled mapper as well. I can do more than just straight conversion."

"We understand that you are an excellent level designer," n01 replied via e-mail. "However, the world is already complete in every respect. It merely needs total conversion, element by element. Please restrict yourself to that task."

Oh well. Maybe they'd come around. He'd never seen a game yet that couldn't stand to be improved — unless it was one of his own.

Barton saw no reason not to use the same procedures he'd used when converting *Gorefest* into *Skullpulper.* You built a world up from the basics. Code was more basic than textures, but he didn't have access to that. So he'd start with textures, then do models (and the sounds that went with them), and finally (best for last) invent a new armament.

"The number of textures in the game is immense," a message from n01 had informed him. "However, if you will kindly assemble the elements of a new visual language, we have utilities to employ your textures as the basis for an almost infinite variation of new patterns."

So they took shortcuts, but that was kewl. So did he. Even his rush-jobs still had the definitive Needles look. With the money he was making, he could have afforded to hire a few artists, but he prided himself on being a renaissance kid. This was to be his vision, start to finish.

He began with a tile, 64 by 64 pixels square, blown up to fill his screen. One pixel at a time, he began to shade and sketch and manipulate until he had an interesting texture. He used his much-hacked version of *Mickey's MasterPainter,* a Disney painting program he'd been using for all his art projects since he was six years old. Sometimes he started with a blank tile; more often he worked from an existing image — such as a photograph or a modified tile from *Skullpulper.* He designed brown panels striated with

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darker lines, punctuated with knotholes like long, torn, gaping faces. He made tiles of grainy gray and speckled brown, poking up from matted green, to serve as rocky ground and sparse vegetation. He created panels set with gruesome demonic faces, leering fanged gargoyles. Mushroom-hued alien textures. Metal meshwork smeared with what looked like old, rotten blood. Tessellated grids clotted with hair and tissue. He made everything a designer would want in a world.

After days of unbroken work, Barton began to see his custom textures everywhere. This always happened in the middle of a project. When he lay down to snatch a few hours of sleep, colored tiles replicated themselves on the undersides of his eyelids, wallpapering the interior of his brain with riveted blue panels, ocher brickwork, coppery asphalt. When he woke and wandered upstairs for more of the sugary espresso fuel he craved, the walls seemed to crawl with patterns he had designed. The biggest difference between the visual content of his dreams and his waking hours was the lack of a monitor framing his dreams. And sometimes he dreamed the monitor as well.

It was more than a week before he had a complete set of textures he was happy with — the makings of a new world. He gathered the files into a single pack, zipped it up, and e-mailed it to Noware. That was at 3:14 a.m. on a Saturday.

Just before noon of the same day, when he finally rolled out of bed, there was a message from n01 waiting in his mailbox. He expected, at worst, a mere confirmation: Textures received. At best, the usual raves. What greeted him was both unexpected and unwelcome.

> Excellent work, Mr. Needles (may we call you Lord?)! Many of these are everything we had hoped for, and should serve to fill in every aspect of our game. However, we note that overall there is a certain grim, even cruel, quality to the work. We discern little of lightness here, little of humor or human kindness —

"Human kindness?" he said with a sleepy snarl. "What is this shit?"

> We are therefore returning certain textures which we consider inappropriate for this conversion, and request that you kindly

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recast them with a somewhat more benign demeanor. It is our intention that this game be significantly less grueling and gruesome than the usual fare. We believe our conversion will find a ready niche in a world already saturated with bloodlust and senseless violence.

Attached to this message was a file comprised of every tile that was even slightly macabre or sinister: the demon faces, the gory floors, the gears clogged with flesh.

In Barton's first flush of disgust and indignation, he started a letter like those he had fired at GoreX toward the end of the *Skullpulper* conversion, letting his venom shape and seethe through every bitter sentence. But gradually he found himself reconsidering such a rash response. If Noware had stated their intentions at the outset, he could have told them to flick off before agreeing to their terms. But now...*the money*. Yes, *the money*, already beginning to bubble yeastily and rise like wonderful dough, inflating....

In the end, he deleted the letter.

Why had they picked *him* for the TC? They knew his work — they'd praised it. Had they sought him out with the ulterior intention of subverting his natural style? He still suspected they were some sort of quasi-religious outfit. Maybe it was Barton himself they wished to convert.

Well, they couldn't touch him. He would do what they asked, but in the end he would have his way. In the end it would be Lord Needles's world.

He treated the revision work with economical disdain, devising a program to switch the goriest tones of clotted blood with soothing pinks, soft blues, subdued nursery-room yellows. The multitude of fierce icons were more difficult to alter, but he devised a fractal filter that softened and blurred the masks of evil, then re-sharpened them into whimsical forms. Wicked spikes and jagged fangs softened into curls and spirals like multicolored rotelle pasta. The grimly leering slits of demon-serpent eyes became cheerful crescent moons mounted on the fuzzy cheeks of smiling-snouted orange teddy bears.

Barton reserved the serpent smirks for himself. And carefully laid the groundwork for his subversive masterpiece.

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The batch of revised textures, fired back at Noware approximately 12 hours after their rejection, met with no further objection: "Textures received. More than acceptable. Please commence entity conversion based on the attached model files."

This terse message was accompanied by an immense collection of .mdl files. Once he began to examine the files, he was disappointed to find how utterly unimaginative they were.

No monsters. No aliens. No marine sergeants frothing bloody foam.

Instead, he found people, all sizes and shapes and colors, all ages, but all utterly ordinary. The fact that they were naked was the strangest thing about them. Game models were usually decked in flamboyant colors, military garb, savage armor. So the nakedness of these was odd...but ultimately boring.

His first task, therefore, was to make the models interesting again. That should be no problem. There were enough similarities in the basic human forms that one good all-purpose program would be able to remake the entire tedious population on a global basis.

On a whim, and for consistency's sake, he went back to the image of the stupid cuddly teddy bear he had concocted for his tiles. Having settled on a basic teddy bear model, he went through the human model files, altering all of them in one sweep, creating a motley army of awkward, patchy teddy bears. He spent the next day tweaking them individually, keeping limbs aligned and furry snouts smiling.

The next group of models was harder to comprehend: batches of limbs, unattached to any creature; horns and fur and scales. There were machine parts, things that looked like the hoods of generic midsized cars, lampstand bases, twigs and fronds. He no longer had any idea what he was altering. He followed his own sense of style, hoping to make all these oddments look as if they shared some common source; he teased the limbs into long strings and let them snap back into floppy curls. He turned gentle arcs into spadelike parabolas. He had never worked in the dark like this before, guided only by a sense of rightness; but after a time he found it addictive. He enjoyed the alterations for their own sake, without a thought to their purpose or ultimate use, or to what sort of game this all added up to. Days passed; and, more importantly, nights, when he hardly

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stirred from his seat. But while he reveled in the work, his plans for revenge were far from forgotten.

All the grimness, all the cruelty, that was such an essential element of everything he'd done before the Noware TC, he carefully set aside for a private project. It was to be a secret entity, something made all the more hideous by contrast to the warm and whimsical creatures which surrounded it.

Barton distilled his conception of evil into a hybrid bearing the worst features of every monster he had ever wrought or dreamed of. A Demon Lord. In scale, it was several hundred times the size of the human figures; it was gray and black and dripping with blood; its maw a festering pocket of abscessed fangs and sucking lamprey tongues. Its body was a slimy mass of chancres from which razor-hooked tendrils uncurled, and it moved on a carpet of insect legs that could adhere to any surface. It was covered with eyes and armor, and was all but unstoppable. He decided to include one — and only one — weapon in the artillery pack which, if cleverly used, might kill it.

The hardest thing was finding the right sound for the beast. He experimented for days until hitting upon a satisfactory noise, achieved by feeding glass and bone and masses of sinewy fat into the kitchen sink garbage disposal and recording the gurgling, grinding sound with a microphone taped to the plumbing down where the razors whirled. By raising this to an almost intolerably high pitch, he captured what sounded like a scream of demonic triumph.

The Demon Lord would be Barton Needles's signature. Anyone who played the game would recognize his handiwork as soon as the monster devoured them.

But naturally he could not simply e-mail the Demon Lord to n01@noware.org and expect accolades. He could imagine their shock and horror, and then their polite rejection. Well, he would not give them a chance to reject it before letting them know what he thought of their namby-pamby vision of a peaceful world. First, there would be a good long reign of carnage.

Noware had unknowingly delivered the means of its undoing into his hands. The original collection of models had been accompanied by a large DLL file — a dynamic link library containing a number of animation and

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other routines shared by many of the models. Changes to the models necessitated changes to the animation functions; and Noware had entrusted him with this rudimentary programming task.

He compressed his Demon Lord data and hid the unlabeled array among others in the DLL. He then found an ordinary animation function, one that would be called fairly frequently during runtime, and made one minor alteration: at random intervals the normally useful function would return a pointer not to an ordinary animation function, but to the Demon Lord array. The game would then decompress, load, and let loose the monster.

If Noware eventually did locate the monster array and tried to remove it, *all* model animations would fail. Meanwhile, it was self-triggering, and would spawn at random but frequent intervals. Over time, if the creatures were not killed, there would be hordes of them all through the game. By then, of course, the hard-core gamers would have risen to the challenge and mastered the tricks of the arsenal.

On the other hand, no hard-core gamer of Barton's experience would spend more than two minutes in this particular world anyway. With all its soft edges and pastel colors, it would repel them instantly. It was just as well he was working anonymously. A world like this would be death to his reputation...except for the Demon Lord aspect.

He would do things differently next time. Not that there need be a next time. Once he'd been paid in full for the Noware TC, he would have the capital he needed to start his own company, with a few hand-picked employees. He'd rent an office on the cheap end of Water Street, and a renaissance of coolness would surely crystallize around his arrival. He'd buy a new car...something fast and flashy and astronomically expensive. Yes, it was time to think along those lines.

He packed up the model files and shipped them off to Noware. The money was almost his. Nothing remained now but to create or convert an arsenal of weapons, an immensely enjoyable task after so much tiptoeing around. It was hard to imagine how even the grubs at Noware could expect him to make chainguns and rocket launchers seem sweet and innocent. Ultimately, a weapon was a weapon, even if it shot marshmallows and had a fuzzy pink handgrip.

Acknowledgment arrived no more than forty-five minutes after he'd sent off the models.

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Dear Lord Needles:

Thank you for delivery of your model pack. The models appear more than satisfactory — certainly there is nothing in the least offensive or inappropriate here; further minor modifications can be attended to by our staff if necessary. We have deposited the balance of your payment in the account you previously specified. We thank you for your participation in our TC, and look forward to working with you in the future should any similar project ever again arise.

Barton's surprise was enormous. He typed a hasty response: "I don't understand. I'm still waiting to convert the weapons pack. If you gave that work to someone else I'll be really p.o.'d — and you don't want to p. me o.!"

His fingers slammed and skittered on the keyboard. He smashed the Send button and waited in a fury for n01's reply.

It came almost instantly:

All weapons code has been expunged from source. No weapons in our TC. This is to be a peaceful game as we have previously stated. Thank you again for your participation. All elements are in place, and we have received final approval to embark on Total Conversion immediately. We trust you will be pleased with results.

Barton couldn't force himself to stay at the screen another moment. He got up snarling and stormed out of his room.

It seemed to be morning — what hour exactly, or what day, he felt unsure. His mother wavered in the kitchen doorway until she saw his face; then she retreated to the safety of her pots and pans. He rushed out of the house, past his neglected Alfa Romeo. He didn't trust himself to drive right now; he would kill someone — maybe even himself. Well, he wasn't stupid or rash, and he wasn't about to take chances like that. He felt as if he hadn't been out of the house, or used his legs, or felt the sunlight in weeks. He was not far wrong.

Usually — in a deathmatch for instance — rage and thoughts of revenge sharpened his mind, providing a clear black background to his

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thoughts, allowing him to stalk and slay his enemies with deadly precision. Today, for some reason, murk accompanied the anger. The sky was blue, the streets looked fresh and bright, as if a storm had swept them and moved on; but his mood clouded everything. He kept surfacing to find that he'd walked another few blocks. He soon found himself downtown, entering the town square. Trees threw their shadows over him. Up ahead, preschoolers clambered on a climbing structure. A dog chased a Frisbee.

Good, he told himself, calmed by the exercise. *You're getting a grip.*

It was better to plan his next move, and put Noware behind him. He had their money now, that was all that really mattered. With money he could do anything: start his own company, take all the time he needed to make a game that was pure Barton Needles, pure and unadulterated evil. Yes, his next game would be everything the Noware conversion was not.

In that moment of anticipatory calm, he realized he had made himself dizzy by rushing out so quickly after weeks of concentrated mental effort. Dizzy and sick. That explained why the world seemed to be rippling — and why he saw his textures everywhere he looked, as if they were pouring out of his eyes again. Maybe it also explained why the pine trees were suddenly wrapped in blue and scarlet fleurs-de-lis with ornate tessellations; and why the thin, beaded trickles of sap shimmered with a weird fluorescent orange glow.

He headed toward a park bench to sit down, but it was changing, growing narrower at the ends, beginning to sag and spiral into limp dangling curls like the tendrils of a creeping plant. He crouched in the grass and put his head between his knees, eyes shut, hoping his textures would stop crawling over everything he saw.

He would get help next time. He wouldn't try to do it all himself. It was too much for one kid to make over an entire world. He kept his eyes closed until he saw only sparkling darkness, devoid of the self-created patterns he'd been staring at for weeks.

When he opened his eyes, he gazed straight down at the grass and earth underfoot.

The grass was red. The earth beneath the blades was purple, faintly shot through with lime. Things were crawling in the soil — things like soft enormous pink ants with floppy legs.

Barton shot upright — too fast, for it made him even dizzier. As the

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world spun, he saw it had been completely remade with his textures. He couldn't stop seeing them no matter where he looked. The buildings at the far edge of the square were all colors but the proper ones; they were shaped like enormous saggy mushrooms, puddling on the soft cushions of streets that were not so much paved as upholstered.

Barton turned and ran toward home, hoping he could find his way now that he'd lost his senses.

Near the edge of the square, something darted to and fro, dragging a leash across grass that stubbornly refused to revert from red. If he squinted his eyes it was still mostly a dog, but the sound it made was not at all canine. Where had he heard it before? It shot between his legs, snagging him in the dragging leash. Somewhere in the distance he could hear its owner piping on a weird shrill dog whistle. Hopelessly tangled, Barton fell. As the dog circled toward his face, he braced for a licking.

Then he remembered where he had heard the creature's call. Like the textures, it was something he'd carried in his head that had somehow spilled out into the world. It was glass and bone and metal and meat, all grinding together in a bottomless bubbling throat.

The cries, with all their overtones of impending total victory, grew louder as the Demon Lord overshadowed the square, then dimmed to a muted slurping as the first of many lamprey tongues found his face.

Next time they'll want weapons, Barton thought indignantly. *Lots of weapons!*

His final conscious act was the unhappy one of seeking his reflection in a million rheumy eyes, but failing. There were no Lord Needles or even Bartons anywhere.

All he saw were a million orange teddy bears, screaming.

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

THE SHADOW KNOWS

GORDON Van Gelder, the editor of this magazine, is a clever man. When he asked us to write for *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, he wanted us to write four columns a year. He cleverly set our deadlines on dates that we, as scientists who spend our time observing the natural world, could not possibly forget. He said, "Let's make your columns due on the solstices and equinoxes."

Very clever. We haven't forgotten a deadline yet.[1]

In honor of that astute decision, we decided to write this column about the solstices and about the movement of the Sun as perceived from the Earth. We're going to suggest that you spend some time watching shadows, a way of indirectly observing the movement of the Sun across the sky. These observations can put you in touch with natural patterns that humans have been watching for thousands of years — but that most of us modern folks have come to ignore. Along the way, we'll talk about time — we just can't avoid it.

I'M NOT LAZY; I'M A SCIENTIST

We'll start with an observation you can make on a sunny afternoon, while lounging around in a hammock or kicking back in a poolside bar. Take a look at the shadows around you. Find a place where a shadow, maybe the shadow of a building or a fence, makes a straight line. Mark that line somehow — with a rock if you're on the grass, a chalk line if you're on blacktop, or a swizzle stick if you are sipping daiquiris by the pool.

Guess where the shadow will be in fifteen minutes and mark your

[1]It's true. Any scheduling errors have been due to our elliptical eleven-issue orbit. — Ed.

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guess in the same way you marked the shadow. ("Hey, could we have some more swizzle sticks over here? Oh, sure — put 'em in another round of daiquiris.")

In fifteen minutes, check your guess. You may be surprised at how quickly the shadow moved. That is, you may be surprised at how quickly the Sun moved. Or, to be even more accurate, you may be surprised at how quickly the Earth is spinning — about 1000 miles per hour at the equator.

Right now, for simplicity's sake, we're going to talk about the movement of the Sun. We know and you know (and Galileo knew) that the Sun isn't really moving across the sky. But according to Paul, physicists have to be adept at jumping from one point of view to another. According to Pat, so do writers. So we're going to do some jumping around from one point of view to another. But we'll start on Earth (at that poolside bar, maybe) and tell our story from that frame of reference for a while.

Next time you spend the day outside, pay attention to the movement of the shadows as they move with the Sun. The Sun rises more or less in the east (more on that "more or less" later) and sets more or less in the west. So the shadows point more or less west in the morning and more or less east in the afternoon.

An interesting aside here: if you watch the movement of the shadow on a sundial over the course of a day, you'll notice that it moves in a clockwise direction. Coincidence? We don't think so! Early clockmakers designed clocks to mimic the familiar sundial. Those readers who are fond of alternate history stories might consider what might have happened if we used clocks based on sundials that had been developed in the Southern Hemisphere where shadows move the other way!

Shadows are at their longest at sunrise and sunset. When are they at their shortest? Noon, you say? Well...more or less. You see, unlike sunrise and sunset, the concept of noon relates to human time-keeping — and that gets a little tricky.

DOES ANYBODY REALLY KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?

If you are telling time by the Sun, noon is defined as the time when the Sun is at its highest point in the sky. The important words in that sentence are "if you are telling time by the Sun." That is, if you are using *solar time*. Chances are, you are telling time by that device

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strapped to your wrist. And the time on your wrist watch isn't solar time; it's what's called *standard time.* You can blame that on the railroads.

Back before 1883, people used solar time. Each community kept its own time, basing that time on the Sun's position in the sky. Since the Sun is always moving across the sky, noon where you are is at a slightly different time than noon at a place a few miles to the east or west. Back before 1883, noon in one town would be four minutes later than noon in a town fifty miles to the east.

In 1883, to regulate time for the sake of railroad schedules, the United States adopted *standard time,* designating time zones and requiring all communities within a time zone to keep the same time — even though that standard time doesn't quite match solar time.

If you are smack dab in the middle of your time zone, the Sun will be at its highest point at noon. But if you are at one edge of your time zone, solar time may differ from standard time by as much as forty minutes.

WHAT ABOUT THE SOLSTICE?

If you spend some time watching shadows, you'll notice that the position and length of a shadow depend not only on time of day — but also on the time of year. That's because the Sun's position at a certain time is different in different seasons. And that, of course, brings us to the solstices.

What's the longest day of the year? Any good Druid could tell you the answer to that one. The longest day is the summer solstice (June 21 or thereabouts) and the shortest day is the winter solstice (December 21 or thereabouts).

As a knowledgeable fantasy reader, you probably even know of some of the fantasy connections for these dates. The summer solstice is associated with Midsummer's Night Eve, when witches and fairies and other supernatural forces are in control. In *The Hobbit,* the keyhole that lets Bilbo, Thorin, and the dwarves unlock the passage into the dragon's lair opens on Durin's Day, the first day of the last moon of autumn on the threshold of winter.

You know the length of a day changes over the course of a year, but have you ever really paid much attention to the position of the Sun — other than squinting when the summer Sun comes in your window too early or complaining when the days get too short? Well, here's your chance.

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For those of you with a lot of patience, here's an activity that takes a year to complete. You need a south-facing window, a pocket mirror, some small Post-Its, and a lot of patience. Choose a time of day when you'll be home at least once every couple of weeks for the next year. Put your little mirror on the window sill and position it so that it reflects a spot of sunlight on the wall or the ceiling. Cover most of the mirror with masking tape, leaving only a 1/4" square exposed.

If you can, fasten the mirror in place so no one moves it by accident. Pat stuck hers down with some stuff called "museum putty," that's sold in California under the brand name Quake Hold™. You folks who are sensible enough to live far away from the fault zone will have to come up with your own methods.

Note the time and date on a Post-It, and stick the Post-It to the wall or ceiling where the spot of light reflecting from your mirror falls. A week later, at the same time, do it again. And a week later, do it again. Repeat for an entire year.

As you do this, you need to use standard time. If you move your clock forward (or back) to adjust for daylight savings time, change the time that you make your weekly mark by an hour.

Keep it up, and at the end of a year, the Post-Its will form a figure eight on your wall. The marker from mid-December will be at one end of the eight and the marker from mid-June will be at the other. This pattern is called the *analemma*, which is Latin for "sundial." The analemma is a visual record of the Sun's changing position over the course of a year.

This is the same figure 8 you see on Earth globes — usually in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It is also known as the equation of time. Each planet has its own shape for the analemma. On Mars, the analemma is the shape of a teardrop.

Pat is in the middle of doing this activity. (On Earth, not on Mars.) As we write this column, she has Post-Its all over the ceiling of her sun porch. She started back in December and we're writing this in March, so she's not even halfway done yet.

If you (like most of us), prefer instant gratification, then you probably have access to the World Wide Web. In that case, we suggest you visit www.skypub.com/spc/staff/dic.html. On that web site, you find Dennis di Cicco's award-winning, year-long photograph of the analemma made in the late 1970s. But to convince yourself that Dennis

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didn't cheat and do this in a darkroom, you still might want to try the experiment with a mirror and Post-Its. Depends on how trusting you are. (According to Paul, scientists must be professional doubters. But he's not the one with Post-Its all over his ceiling, so go figure.)

SO WHY ALREADY?

You want to know *why* the analemma is a figure eight, rather than a teardrop or an oval or a circle? You fool! Pat wanted to know why, once upon a time. Days later, after much explanation with circles and arrows and too many diagrams and too much math, she decided she didn't want to know the whole story.

We're going to give you the short version of why the analemma is a figure eight. If you must understand every last detail (which Pat claims is enough to make a person's head explode), we recommend you visit www.analemma.com, a thoroughly detailed web site with animations and full discussion of why the Sun does that.

We'll start you off with an easy question: where does the Sun rise? Did we hear you say "east"? Sorry. It's an easy question, but the answer is tricky. We warned you about that earlier, remember?

If you were to watch the Sun rise each morning over the course of an entire year, you'd see that the Sun doesn't always rise in the same place. In the summer, in the Northern Hemisphere, the Sun rises a little bit north of due east. The date on which it rises the farthest north of due east is June 21, the summer solstice and the longest day of the year. In the winter, in the Northern Hemisphere, the Sun rises a little bit south of due east. The date on which it rises the farthest to the south is December 21, the winter solstice and the shortest day of the year.

Suppose you watched the path of the Sun on the winter solstice and on the summer solstice. On the summer solstice, the Sun is much higher above the horizon at noon than it is on the winter solstice, taking a longer path across the sky. On the winter solstice, the Sun never gets as high in the sky.

Okay, now we're going to have to do one of those shifts in viewpoint that physicists and writers like. Instead of staying on Earth, we need to take a look at the solar system from the outside, examining the Earth's orbit.

The Sun's path across the sky changes with the seasons partly because the Earth's axis (the imaginary

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line through the Earth around which the planet spins) is tilted with respect to the Earth's orbit around the Sun. As the Earth orbits the Sun, the North Pole (the point where the axis intersects with the Earth's Northern Hemisphere) always points in the same direction, pointing near Polaris, the North Star. (The direction of the Earth's axis does change over a 26,000 year cycle, which means that the analemma evolves with time. But we're not going to get into that here.)

Because the Earth's axis is tilted, the Earth's Northern Hemisphere is tipped toward the Sun during a portion of the Earth's orbit. That's when it's summer in the Northern Hemisphere. The North Pole is tipped toward the Sun and the Sun shines on a greater area of the Northern Hemisphere. As the Earth spins, places in the Northern Hemisphere stay in the sunlit area longer, and the days are longer.

At the other extreme of the Earth's orbit, the Earth's Northern Hemisphere is tipped away from the Sun. That's when it's winter in the Northern Hemisphere. The Sun shines on a smaller area of the Northern Hemisphere, and the days are shorter.

The Earth's tilt affects the position of the Sun in the sky — and so does the shape of the Earth's orbit around the Sun. You might think that the Earth always traveled about the same speed on its way around the Sun. That would be the case if the Earth's orbit were circular — but it's not. The Earth's orbit is elliptical, which means that sometimes the Sun is closer to the Earth and sometimes it's farther away. The difference in distance is only about three percent of the overall distance. That may not seem like much, but it makes a difference to the speed of the Earth.

Suppose you took the average speed of the Earth — about thirty kilometers per second. If you checked the planet's speed when it was closer to the Sun (which happens in January), you'd find it was a little faster than that average. When the Earth was farthest from the Sun, in July, you'd find that it was moving a little slower than average.

MEANWHILE, BACK ON EARTH

That's what all this looks like from outside the solar system. How does all this affect what you see on the planet Earth?

Paul says that the analemma would be easier to understand if

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there were no atmosphere on the Earth. Without the atmosphere to scatter the Sun's light, we could see the stars during the daytime, and we'd be able to see the Sun's movement against the background stars. (Of course, if there were no atmosphere we couldn't breathe. But we'd understand the analemma. Pat says that seems like a small consolation.) Anyway, if we could see the Sun moving against a background of stars, we'd see that the Sun moves on a regular path through the stars, a path called the ecliptic.

Suppose you could see the stars when the Sun is out. Suppose you're watching the stars at around noon in mid-November. The Sun is in the constellation of Scorpio, perhaps near the star called Antares. Just before noon the next day, about 23 hours and 56 minutes later, you check on the position of Antares. Antares will be back in the same place in the sky. The Sun, however, won't yet have reached its highest point in the sky. That will take about four more minutes. From your point of view on Earth, the Sun is lagging four minutes behind the stars.

Add together the time it takes for Antares to return to its original position and the four minutes that it takes to get the Sun back to its original position. You get 24 hours or one average day. Very tidy, isn't it?

Each day, the Sun lags behind the stars. Over the course of months, this accumulating difference means that different stars rise at different times. In the Northern Hemisphere, for example, Scorpio is a summer constellation — you don't see it in the night sky during the winter. The difference between the Sun's movement and the stars' movement has shifted the rising time for the stars that make up Scorpio so that the constellation is up during daylight hours.

Why do the Sun and Antares move across the sky at slightly different rates? Ah, that takes us back to outer space. The Earth is spinning, and that's what brings Antares back to its starting position. But the Earth is also orbiting the Sun. That's why it takes an extra four minutes (or so) for the Sun to get back into position.

No doubt you caught that weaselly little "or so" in the previous sentence. It doesn't always take the Sun exactly four minutes to get back into place. After all, the Earth isn't always orbiting the Sun at the same speed. From your point of view on Earth, that means that the time it takes the Sun to return to a particular place in the sky isn't always

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the same. In early January, when the Earth is nearest to the Sun, the Sun moves farther from one day to the next. It takes longer for the Earth to overtake the Sun and return it to the same place in the sky. It can take eight seconds longer each day. These eight seconds add up from day to day, and the Sun begins to lag behind. In June, when the Sun is farthest from the Earth, the Sun takes less than four minutes to return to its original position.

But that's not all. Remember the Earth's tilt? Over the course of the year, the position of the noontime Sun moves up and down in the sky, because of the Earth's tilt.

Consider the position of the Sun at noon. Maybe you've been told that the Sun is overhead at noon. That's not necessarily so. (Sorry. Someone's been telling you fibs.) In fact, if you are in North America, the Sun is never directly overhead. For the Sun to be directly overhead, you have to be in the tropics, the belt around the Earth between the Tropic of Cancer at 23.5 degrees north latitude and the Tropic of Capricorn at 23.5 degrees south latitude.

On the summer solstice, when the North Pole is tilted 23° 21' toward the Sun, the Sun is directly overhead on the Tropic of Cancer. Six months later, on the winter solstice, the South Pole is tilted toward the Sun and the Sun is directly overhead on the Tropic of Capricorn.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

From our Earth-based viewpoint, the movement of the Sun changes in two ways over the course of the year. The daily path of the Sun moves up and down in the sky, and the time it takes the Sun to reach its noontime position changes, with the average time being four minutes.

Those of you who are familiar with electronics may have seen Lissajous figures, very cool patterns that appear on an oscilloscope screen when you have two signals out of phase with each other. Paul says of the analemma: "It's a Lissajous figure with the Sun moving up and down in the sky once a year and ahead of and behind the rotation of the Earth twice a year." Pat agrees that makes a certain amount of sense: after all, you have two movements that are out of phase and that could certainly create a figure 8. But she says that we have already caused the heads of our audience to explode and we should stop now.

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BUT WAIT! THERE'S MORE!

For those of you who are still with us, here is one more question. You know that the winter solstice is the shortest day of the year. On what day of the year does the Sun rise latest? Or, for those of us who prefer not to be up at dawn, on what day of the year does the Sun set earliest?

Did you say the winter solstice? Not a bad guess, but wrong, nevertheless. Though the winter solstice is the shortest day, it's not the day when the Sun rises latest or sets earliest. The exact date of the latest sunset depends on your exact latitude, but around here the earliest sunset is around about December 7 or so. The latest sunrise is around about January 4. And the winter solstice is December 21, somewhere between the two.

Weird. To understand why this happens, you need to apply the concept of analemma rise and analemma set. And that's something that Paul says makes his head hurt. So we'll stop here, with Pat cheerily putting Post-Its on her ceiling and Paul puzzling over analemma rise. Then maybe we'll have another round of drinks by the pool and watch a few shadows move. After all, it's science.

Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty work at the Exploratorium, a San Francisco museum of science, art, and human perception. To learn more about Pat and Paul, check out their web sites at www.exo.net/jaxxx and www.exo-net/~pauld.

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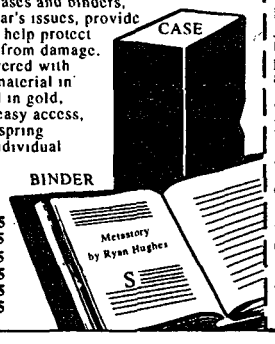

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William Sanders grew up in Arkansas and now lives in Oklahoma. He is the author of sixteen novels, including mysteries, science fiction, and westerns, and his short fiction has garnered him several award nominations in recent years, including a Sidewise Award for his Alternate History story "The Undiscovered." His most recent novel is a hard to classify book called The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan, *which unfortunately is also hard to find in bookstores (it seems to be available largely through online booksellers).*

Like several stories in this issue, this poignant fantasy takes on the classic theme of love's power.

Jennifer, Just Before Midnight

By William Sanders

IT WAS JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT when Graham saw the woman at the bar. Or rather that was when he noticed her; she had, he realized, been standing there for some time, and his eyes must have picked up her presence repeatedly, but only as another figure in the human swirl around him. She was young and pretty, but that was true of most of the women in the room, and, as far as Graham had noticed, of those attending the convention in general. The con scene had definitely undergone major evolution in that regard in the last decade or two. Either that, Graham reflected sourly, or the advancing middle years had affected his perceptions. That sounded eminently plausible.

Be that as it might, the hotel bar had been lined all evening with bright-faced, trim-haunched young women — you weren't supposed to call them "girls" anymore, though if some of the ones drinking here tonight were twenty-one he was H.P. Lovecraft — flashing perfect teeth and displaying, from beneath severely abbreviated ensembles, a great deal of smooth, uniformly tanned skin. Graham had admired them in a vague

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distant way, as he might have admired the lines of a fast sports car without feeling any real desire to drive it. They seemed almost an alien species; their reality barely touched his.

This one, however, was looking straight at him.

There was no doubt about it. She had turned clear around, to stand with her back to the bar, and her gaze was full on Graham. It was hard to read her expression from across the dim and smoky room, but he thought she was smiling.

And here she came now, pushing off from the bar with her elbows, moving gracefully through the crowd, holding her drink carefully in front of her with both hands. As she passed, men turned their heads to look — one large young fellow in a Klingon costume spilled beer on his lap, watching the motion of her hips, and got a blistering look from the little redhead beside him — and, the con scene having evolved in more than one respect, so did quite a few women.

But Graham's primary reaction was to groan silently, and then to raise his drink and down a large and hasty swallow of bourbon. Not now, he thought and wanted to scream, Christ, not now of all times, I *knew* I shouldn't have come to this stupid thing —

"I don't even want to go to the stupid thing," he had said, Wednesday morning. "I hate conventions."

"You used to love them," Margaret reminded him. "You know you did, Keith. We had some good times at the cons."

"That was a different scene. Nowadays — " He shook his head, a little angrily, a lot tiredly. He hadn't had much sleep the night before. Or any other night, for longer than he could recall.

"It's not the way it used to be," he told Margaret. "Now, most of the cons you go to, it's wall-to-wall Trekkies and role-players and costume freaks. And New Agers, and grown men and women whose lives peaked the first time they saw *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* — "

"Oh, come on. The cons always did attract oddballs and misfits. That was half the fun, wasn't it? And," she added, "I'll not mention how a certain elongated young Nebula nominee was dressed the first time a certain promising young illustrator laid eyes on him."

"Sure." Graham had to grin briefly at the memory. "But no matter

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how silly we got, there was always the basic premise that this was *about* certain types of written fiction, and the people who wrote it and read it. Nowadays, half the guests at the average con don't read at all and don't see why they should."

He stopped, wondering why he was ranting like this. He sat down in the uncomfortable chair beside Margaret's bed and took her hand in both of his, feeling the bones through the frighteningly thin covering of flesh. "I'm sorry," he said. "But really, I don't want to go."

"But it's something you need to do," she insisted. "You already promised the committee — "

"They'll understand. They know about you. I already explained that I might not be able to make it."

"Bullshit," she said distinctly. "There's no reason whatever that you can't go. Either I'll be all right or I won't, and if I'm not there won't be anything you or anyone else can do about it."

She raised her head an inch or so from the pillow. "God damn it, Keith, I'm not going to let you waste any more of your life haunting my bedside. You know what they said — it could happen any time, or I could still be lying here this time next year. You're fifty-four years old. You don't have that kind of time to throw away."

Her head fell back; she breathed deeply for a moment, looking up at the ceiling with pain-widened eyes. Those eyes, Graham thought with a bottomless sorrow, those wonderful violet eyes. Nothing else remained of the Margaret of years past; her face was now no more than a pallid mask of lined and taut-drawn skin, and beneath the kerchief on her head was only bare scalp where that dense red-brown mane would never grow again. The wasted shape beneath the stiff white hospital sheet was a cruel caricature of the magnificent body Graham remembered.

"I've got this damned hideous *thing* inside me, and it's killing me." Her voice was very weak but her words came out crisply clear. "I'm not going to let it kill you too. Or let you use it as an excuse for refusing to live."

She turned her head on the pillow, looking at Graham. "Besides, you need this professionally. You haven't had a book out in two years, only half a dozen stories and nothing at all since last winter — you've all but quit, haven't you? And I suppose that's natural, it can't have been easy for

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you to write or even think while you had to deal with what's been happening to me...but you've got to get back to work, and soon. The longer you wait, the harder it'll be."

She glanced about the hospital room. "And you do need to take care of business. The insurance isn't going to cover all of this." Her lips pulled back in a crooked smile. "Not to mention what those ghoulish bastards are going to charge for hauling my ashes."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"Why not?" she said. "You may write fantasy, but it's reality time now. You better learn to deal with it."

She reached across with her free hand and patted his forearm. "Go to the convention, Keith. It'll do you good. Consider it a refresher course in having a life," she said. "God knows you need it."

GRAHAM BLINKED; his hand jerked slightly, almost spilling his drink. He looked up at the girl — the woman — from the bar, who was now standing on the far side of his table, one hand resting on the back of the other chair.

"Hello," she said.

Not, "Hi," Graham noticed, but a genuine hello; give her a point there, anyway. He saw now that she was even prettier than she had looked from across the room: long legs, slender waist, fine-boned features that came very close to qualifying as authentically beautiful — even despite her efforts to spoil them with over-the-top makeup; her lipstick could have stopped traffic in a Seattle fog. Thick taffy-blond hair hung to her bare tanned shoulders. Quite a lot of her was bare, in fact; the little denim skirt barely reached below her crotch, while the skimpy matching top exposed many square inches of flat smooth belly and served to advertise, rather than seriously conceal, a really impressive chest.

She said, "You're Keith Graham, aren't you? I recognized you from the dust-jacket photos. Mind if I sit down?"

A reader? Have to be reasonably nice, then; as Margaret always liked to point out, the readers were the ones who paid the rent and kept you from having to get a real job. This one might look like a reject from a Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders tryout, but what the hell. At least she wasn't

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decked out in fake medieval costume, and she didn't appear to be packing any quartz crystals.

Hastily, a bit clumsily, he got to his feet, pushing back his own chair and rising to his full rangy six feet three — Big Stoop, Margaret had named him on their first night together, after a character in the old *Terry and the Pirates* comic strip — and reaching for the other chair, before he remembered you weren't supposed to do that anymore either. But the blonde didn't object; in fact she seemed to take the old-fashioned courtesy for granted, and she stepped back and stood waiting while he pulled the chair out for her. "Thanks," she said, sitting down and setting her drink on the table. "I hope I'm not bothering you. It's just that you look as if you could use some company. And I've really enjoyed your work."

Graham sighed. "Actually," he said, resuming his seat, "I'm afraid I'm not going to be much company to anyone. You see — "

"Oh, I know," she said quickly. "About your wife. I'm sorry."

Graham frowned. There had been nothing in any of the publications about Margaret's condition; she had insisted on that. He said, "How did you know?"

She shrugged. "I heard from — somebody I know on the committee. Never mind," she said. "I don't imagine you want to talk about it. I just wanted you to know that I understand."

Graham was filled with a sudden terrible anger. No you don't, he shouted inside his head, you understand nothing. How can you understand what it means to love and live with someone for a quarter of a century, until you become almost components of a single whole, and you find yourselves answering each other's questions before they are asked? And then to see her body, that you know so well you could find her blind in a crowd of thousands by her private scent alone, turn into a death trap for her splendid brave spirit; and to stand helplessly while one door of hope after another slams shut in her face...how, you flawless nitwit, could you possibly understand?

"I'm sorry," she said then. "I shouldn't have said it that way. Of course I can't understand what it's like for you." She picked up her drink and turned it in her hands without tasting it. "I don't suppose anyone ever really knows what anything is like for anyone else."

Astonished, Graham could only stare at her.

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She extended a hand across the table. "I'm Jennifer."

Graham took the hand, which was pleasantly soft and cool.

"Jennifer," he repeated stupidly. Thinking, oh my God.

"They're all Jennifers. Even the ones who aren't named Jennifer."

Thus Margaret, three years ago — was it? — at the last convention they had attended together. A colleague of long acquaintance, and approximately their age, had just disappeared into an elevator with an edible-looking young fan in buttock-high cutoffs and a Star Wars T-shirt; and Margaret had remarked that old Roy seemed to have found himself a Jennifer.

"You didn't know?" she said to Graham. "All women do, at least in our age bracket. You get a bunch of middle-aged women sitting around dishing, somebody asks what's happening with so-and-so, somebody else says, 'Oh, you hadn't heard? Her husband's got a Jennifer.'"

"A kind of code?" Graham asked, interested. "Like in a certain type of joke the gay guys are always named Bruce?"

"Something like that. Only it's not a joke, at least not to the woman whose husband has gone Jennifer-crazy. Never mind booze, gambling, even drugs — there's nothing in the known cosmos that can make a middle-aged man throw all judgment to the winds, trash his own life and those of everyone around him, like a willing barely legal girl."

She looked about the crowded convention floor, which, now Graham noticed, seemed fairly alive with Jennifer material. "I can understand it," she said. "They *are* lovely. And I imagine they can do a lot for an older man's ego. We menopausal women have no sense, you know. Just when we need to hang on to the men we've got, when our chances of replacing them are in freefall, we miss no chance to bust your asses. Then we wonder why you run off with the Jennifers."

"I don't," Graham pointed out.

"No," Margaret said, laughing, "you don't, do you? I may have the only truly monogamous man left on the North American landmass. But that's just because I keep you too tired to get up to any extramural antics. Come on, Big Stoop." She pulled him toward the elevators. "You're starting to look a little too fresh and rested. We'd better do something about that before a Jennifer gets you."

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* * *

Graham downed the rest of his bourbon in a single shaky swallow. About to signal to the waitress, he looked at Jennifer. "Anything you want?"

She raised her drink, a horrible-looking blue concoction, and took a tiny sip. "Ooh," she said, making a face. "Yes, something besides this thing. In fact I think I'd like to have what you're having."

"Are you sure?" Graham asked dubiously. "It's straight bourbon on the rocks."

"Sounds perfect. Please."

Graham caught the waitress's eye, pointed to his empty glass, and held up two fingers. The waitress nodded and hurried off through the crowd. Jennifer was looking at her drink. "Looks like some kind of toilet bowl cleaner, doesn't it?" she said. "Tastes like it, too."

"What is it?"

"A blue kamikaze, they call it. I don't know what's in it. Somebody bought it for me." She pushed the drink away. "I wonder who thinks up these weird drinks."

Bored bartenders, according to Margaret. "Bored bartenders," Graham said.

"I believe it. You know," Jennifer said, "I remember that story of yours about the invisible bartender — "

The waitress reappeared with two bourbons. Graham signed for them and stood up. Much as he hated to interrupt — no one had mentioned that story in a long time, and it was one of his favorites — certain pressures had become critical. He said, "Excuse me," and headed for the rear hallway.

The men's room was deserted when he got there, surprising considering the crowd in the bar. But then, as he was finishing up, a familiar nasal bray said, "Well, well. How's it, Keith my man? Getting any?"

Graham zipped and turned. Lenny Devlin grinned at him from the doorway, flashing slightly yellow teeth beneath a graying mustache. "Saw you there," Devlin said, coming in and heading for the urinals, while Graham washed his hands. "Got yourself something young, huh?"

He hunched his stubby frame closer to the target area, leaned an elbow against the wall, and looked over his shoulder at Graham. "So Straight Arrow Graham finally joins the dirty old men's club. About time, too.

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Haven't I told you all these years, the cons are where the young pussy is? Never did understand you guys who brought your wives along."

Graham suppressed a desire to upend the little bastard — a degenerate Munchkin, Margaret had called him — and shove his head into the toilet. He said, "Let it go, Lenny. I'm not in the mood."

"No? Then let me have a crack at her." Devlin's guffaw filled the confined space. "I tell you, Keith, the biggest breakthrough of my life — next to getting the Hugo — was finding out that the young ones aren't just hotter-looking, they're actually easier to nail. They're still open, you should pardon the expression, to a little adventure. Like a one-nighter with a noted author." He turned around, yanking at his zipper. "After they hit legal drinking age, they start looking for commitments and relationships. Fuck which."

There was no use trying to respond; the little man's ego was impenetrable even to direct insult. Graham dried his hands and left, hearing behind him Devlin's moist laugh and a shout of, "Once more into the breach, Sir Keith! Give her one for me!"

Re-entering the bar, he looked toward his table, half expecting it to be empty. But Jennifer was still sitting there, hands folded on the table, waiting, evidently, for him. To his faint disgust he found he was very glad to see her; and he hurried back across the room, trying to ignore the stirrings of an old excitement.

Some time later, Jennifer set her empty glass on the table and said, "Enough. It's getting late."

Graham was amazed to see that it was going on one o'clock. Time, the old wheezer had it, flew when you were having fun; and he had to admit that he was having something very close to a good time.

Jennifer had turned out to be remarkably good company, and not merely for the obvious reasons. For all her bimbo-Barbie appearance, she clearly had a first-class mind; she actually spoke English, too, and so far she had not once said "totally" or spiked her sentences with meaningless interjections of "like."

She also possessed a near-encyclopedic knowledge of Graham's published work. Being in this respect no different from any other author, he took this as a sign of outstanding intellect and taste.

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With real regret, then, he said, "Calling it a night?"

"Oh, no." She pushed her chair back and stood up, smoothing the little denim skirt over her golden thighs. "I want to dance. Come on."

There was no dance floor as such, but there was a small, more or less clear area near the back wall where a few couples were moving minimally about to recorded music. Graham said, "I don't think — "

"I don't want you to think." Jennifer grasped his hand firmly and tugged. "I just want you to dance with me."

Reluctantly, he got up and followed her. The music was loud and fast and he wondered what he was supposed to do; but then as they reached the dance area the record ended and a slow tune came on, Billy Joel's "An Innocent Man." Jennifer turned to face him and he took her hand and put his right arm lightly about her waist. The top of her head was barely level with his chin.

"I haven't done this in a long time," he confessed, moving his feet tentatively, trying to find the step.

"It's like riding a bicycle," she said. "Some things you never lose."

"I've heard that expression all my life," Graham told her. "But you know, last summer I tried to ride a bicycle and nearly killed myself."

She moved closer and rested her face against his shoulder. His hand at her waist registered the rhythmic sway of her hips. "You're doing just fine," she assured him.

Her perfume was a little on the heavy side but he inhaled it greedily. "You smell good," he said after a couple of minutes.

"You feel good," she replied, and emphasized her words with a quick light thrust of her pelvis against him. Then, as his body involuntarily responded, "Oh, my...." She looked up at him, eyes widening slightly. "My, *my*. I think I'm impressed."

Graham felt the blood darken his face. He stopped — the song was almost over anyway — and stepped back, still holding her hand. "I'm too old to play games," he said more harshly than he had intended. "What's happening?"

She tilted her head and smiled. "What's happening?" she repeated. "Not much of anything, that I can see. Not at the moment."

Her hand tightened suddenly on his. "What I think is *about* to happen, though," she said in a lower voice, "I think we're about to go up to your

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room and more or less screw our brains out. Is that all right with you?"

Graham opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. The second time he heard himself say, "Why not?"

But up in the room, sitting still fully dressed on the edge of the bed, he said, "I'm sorry, Jennifer. I really don't think this is a good idea."

She paused in the middle of the room, barefoot, one hand on the single button of her denim top. "Feeling guilty?" she asked quietly. "Because of your wife?"

He nodded. She came over and stood before him. "Listen," she said, "you've got to stop thinking that way. How long has it been, now?"

"You mean since — " He had to think. "A couple of years, I guess. Closer to three, really."

"Then don't you think your wife would understand? Don't you think she knows you have needs?"

"That's what she said," Graham admitted. "The last time I saw her before leaving for this convention, she said something like that. Said I should go ahead and find someone to take care of my needs."

Actually Margaret's words had been, "Get out there, Big Stoop, and find yourself a Jennifer." But there was no way Graham was going to repeat that, let alone explain it, to this one or anyone else.

"Then," Jennifer said, "for God's sake show her some respect and quit second-guessing her. You don't have the right." She made a little gesture at her body. "Do it with me, do it with somebody else, do it with your right hand or not at all, but don't lay your own failure of nerve at her feet. She doesn't need it right now."

Graham thought it over. "Yes," he said finally, and nodded. "You're right. Thanks."

He toed off his shoes without untying them and began unbuttoning his shirt. Jennifer took a couple of backward steps, still facing him, and undid the top and let it slide off her shoulders. She did something at her waist and the skirt dropped to the floor, leaving her standing in tiny, almost transparent powder-blue panties and a lacy little matching bra.

Graham's hands seemed suddenly to belong to someone else.

Her eyes on Graham's face, Jennifer popped the catch between her breasts and slipped out of the bra. There had been no engineering trickery

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at work; everything stayed high and firm and full. Her nipples were unusually large and bright pink.

She hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her panties and eased them down over her flanks. The blond hair proved to be original; a fine flaxen spray decorated her pubic mound. Her skin fairly glowed in the light from the bedside lamp.

"Well?" she said, and put her hands on her hips. "If you're too old to play games, you must be old enough to undress yourself."

Hurriedly he got to his feet, shucking out of the shirt and reaching for his belt buckle. Jennifer moved past him and stretched herself luxuriously on the bed. "All right," she said approvingly, watching, as he got out of his pants.

Naked, he stopped beside the bed. "Ah — just remember, it *has* been a long time."

She laughed, making everything bounce and ripple. "The way it looks from here," she said pointedly, "it's definitely been long enough."

She held out her arms and opened her thighs. "Come on, now. Time to get back on that bike and start pedaling."

Heart hammering, he mounted her. At the first warm sliding contact she clutched at him and shuddered. "See," she whispered, "you haven't lost it. Haven't lost a thing — "

THE REST of the night was a scented blur of couplings and uncouplings, of humpings and pumpings and ridings and bestridings, all over the big bed and then at various locations around the room and even once in the shower. Jennifer was an agile and imaginative partner with, it developed, no inhibitions whatever as to techniques, positions, or orifices. She was also able, somehow, to cause Graham to tap into unsuspected reserves of stamina, so that he found himself doing things he had not dreamed of for decades.

Gray light was beginning to filter through the window curtains when Graham finally fell asleep, feeling Jennifer's breath on his neck and the soft flattening of her breasts against his back. From the rhythm of her breathing he thought she was still awake, and he wanted to speak to her, but the thought got away from him and he slipped away into the darkness.

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When he awoke the room was brightly lit and Jennifer was no longer beside him. He sat up, after a confused moment, and looked around, just as she came padding naked out of the bathroom.

"Oh, wow," she said. "I didn't want to, like, wake you up."

He blinked as she crossed the room and began picking up her clothing. "Man," she said, "I must have been, like, totally shitfaced, you know?" She glanced at him and grinned. "Because, like, I don't remember *anything.*"

She bent, stepped into the powder-blue panties, and hiked them up over her hips. Her movements were entirely unself-conscious; she might have been tying a shoe or brushing her hair.

"I mean, like, don't get me wrong," she added quickly. "I'm sure you're a cool dude and we had a good time and all." She grinned again, and this time she did look a little embarrassed. "It sure *feels* like we had an awesome time, know what I'm saying? But it's just, like, totally *gone.* Those fucking blue kamikazes, I guess."

She hooked the bra over her shoulders and fitted her breasts into the cups. "Don't be, like, offended or anything," she said, "but I don't even remember who you are."

His mouth felt very dry. "For God's sake, Jennifer — "

She giggled. "Jennifer? Hey, dude, sounds like you got pretty wasted yourself. My name's not Jennifer," she said, hooking the bra's catch. "I'm Stephanie. Guess you can't remember either."

She pulled the skirt on. 'Hey," she said, "are you, like, on TV or anything?" She zipped, buttoned, and made a small tugging adjustment. "That's right," she said, "they're having some kind of, like, Star Trek convention or something, aren't they? At, like, the hotel? I think I heard about that." She shrugged into the top. "Are you, like, into that? I don't know anything about it. I just went there for a drink because they're not too careful about checking ID."

Wonderful, Graham thought. An underage psycho with multiple personalities. If only I can get her out of here before she turns into Greta the Axe Murderer.

She bent again and picked up her shoes, looked at them, and made a dismissive face. "Well," she said to Graham "like I say, it must have been pretty decent. Sorry I can't remember. But hey, have a good one, okay?"

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Picking up her purse, carrying the shoes in her other hand, she opened the door. "Shit," Graham heard her mutter, "what fucking time is it, anyway?"

The door closed behind her. Graham lay back and, after a moment, laughed softly to himself. It wasn't a very humorous laugh.

That was when the bedside phone rang. He cursed, rolled over, and grabbed up the receiver. "Yes?" he said.

A small timid voice said, "Mr. Graham? This is the front desk. I'm afraid there's been some kind of mistake." Graham heard apologetic throat-clearing sounds. "Apparently there was a phone call for you last night, but for some reason you were never paged. We're very sorry — "

"Never mind," Graham said quickly. "Where was the call from? Is there a message?"

"Yes, in fact, you're to call St. Andrew's Hospital at — "

"I know where it is," Graham interrupted. "You've got the number there, don't you? Go ahead and ring me through."

A few minutes later Graham was listening to another faceless voice, this one a woman's, cool and efficient-sounding but softened by an obvious sympathy. "Mr. Graham," it said, "I'm afraid Margaret passed away last night, just before midnight."

He bent forward until his face almost touched his knees. His mouth opened without making any sound. For an instant it felt as if all his skin had been stripped away.

"For what it may be worth," the voice added after a moment, "it was very peaceful. It happened in her sleep and she never woke up. The nurses say she actually appeared to be smiling."

Graham sat up as the voice talked on. He hardly heard, let alone paid attention to the words. The telephone receiver hung all but forgotten in his hand as he stared across the room, at the bright-red lipstick message printed on the mirror:

SO LONG
BIG STOOP
DAMN
WE WERE GOOD

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman has been finishing up a new novel, A Red Heart of Memories, *which expands upon her 1996 story "Here We Come A-Wandering." Her latest story for us shows one way of making the best of a marriage that wasn't all it first appeared to be.*

Salvage Efforts

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

"I'M GOING TO CHANGE INTO my overalls now," I said, heading for the bedroom.

When you're married to a god, you have to watch what you say.

"What an intriguing idea," he said. He pointed at me.

The next instant I lay on the ground, flatter than I was comfortable being, without the power of vision, and incapable of independent motion. My sense of touch had changed. I was aware of myself as a multitude of threads interwoven, with acres of thready skin.

When he picked me up and put me on, I sensed him as a series of textures and varying temperatures, moisture differences and body oils and sweat, skin and hair and heat. There was an excitation in just lying against him — perhaps the presence of his god power. I could tell as I touched him that he wore no other clothes than me. Half of me lay against much of him, conscious of many differences in his finite acre; and half of me lay open to the air, which was different from one height to the next, full of touches/tastes I normally didn't perceive at all.

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Even while I gave myself up to all these strange and wonderful sensations, to this new relationship with my husband that involved an intimacy we had never shared before, in my core (wherever that was in this body) anger grew, starting as a sullen ember of heat, flaring higher as minutes passed and I remained in this shape without having been asked, without the power to ask to change back.

Had I known before I married the man that he was a god, I would have thought longer and harder about my answer to his proposal.

Though I couldn't move, I was conscious of motion; I knew my husband walked and sat with me wrapped around him. We went somewhere in the car: I could feel the vinyl upholstery slick against parts of me, though at first I didn't know what it was.

This wasn't nice, wearing me in public as though I were slave or adornment. Where was he wearing me? Who would see us? What was my husband saying about it? Usually I liked his sense of humor — when I could hear it to appreciate it. He had a mean streak, though.

From reading myths, one gets the feeling this is a chronic problem with gods.

Perhaps he was even now telling someone the truth about me. I wouldn't put it past him. None of his beer buddies would believe it, but my husband would laugh, knowing he had handed over an unruly secret that, if believed, could hurt both of us.

A hand that felt different from my husband's in texture, composition, and temperature slapped some part of me for which I had no name.

Someone I couldn't see, someone to whom I didn't know whether I had ever been introduced, had touched me. Anger spread through my every thread. The touch was not unpleasant or invasive or harmful, but nevertheless, it was a violation. My husband shouldn't have put me in this position.

Yet what could I do?

Well, what *could* I do?

I unmeshed my threads. Anger gave me the power of fray. I let myself go over and over again.

I don't know how long this orgy of disintegration lasted. It frightened me while I was in the midst of it — what if I could never recollect myself again? As connections unraveled I grew farther away from myself. Thoughts and intentions fragmented.

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Let him stand there naked, wherever he is, I thought while I still could. It wasn't much of a revenge — he had talked himself out of much worse situations, and nakedness didn't bother him. It was what was in my power, the best and worst that I could do.

Near the end I understood this was a decision I might never recover from, but I couldn't reverse it.

I wasn't sure I wanted to.

There were many tastes and textures on the floor, where more and more of me piled.

Before I could make sense of these new tastes, I lost track of myself and subsided into some lower state of consciousness where thoughts traveled through me without ever rubbing together.

I OPENED EYES, and thought how strange that was. Light and shadow mixed and sorted into some kind of view. I blinked. Eyelids! It took time for me to understand what I was looking at. Intense dark squares and rectangles with colors in them, scattered over a light yellow background. Our bedroom wall, impressionist prints tacked up, all our favorites. Whenever we got tired of one, my husband could change it by willing it to be something else.

I lay on our bed, aware of the sheets above and below me in all their myriad threads, warm but unalive.

The bed dipped as my husband sat beside me. His face was pale. "What got into you?" he said, his voice hoarse. "I had to re-create you from next to nothing! It was almost beyond me!"

Despair flooded me. If he had indeed created me, how was I ever going to escape his control?

Was I even myself? What if he had put me back together but had forgotten some important pieces, or left out things he had never liked?

I lay without speaking for some time, exploring myself. If anything was gone, I couldn't tell.

I would never be able to tell.

He touched my cheek. I could feel his hand's warmth, but gone was the ability to sense intimately the whorls on his fingertips, the sweat and fear that touched his palm. "Eva," he said, "what happened?"

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"I agreed to love and honor you," I said, "not to be your clothes."

"It was just a joke!"

"It stopped being funny when someone else touched — scratch that! I didn't think it was funny from the first. You made me powerless."

He sat for a while, gazing toward the wall. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"You never do."

"I promise never to do it again," he said.

I sighed.

That night he went out. I wanted him to. He had stayed by me for several hours, just touching me, occasionally apologizing until I told him to stop that, it was all right, I knew he hadn't intended to hurt me.

After he left, I lay and thought about being thread, being cloth, finally let myself appreciate how different and strange that had been. Before I knew my husband, I had never felt anything like this. And I used to thrive on novelty.

I rose and got a suitcase down from an upper closet shelf and set it open on the bed. I pulled out my dresser drawers and took underwear and socks out, one pair at a time, placing them in the suitcase. The cloth tingled against my hand; I felt as though we were related.

I didn't want to have this attitude toward clothes. I wanted them to go back to just being things I could wear without thinking about it. Perhaps this uncomfortable association would fade. Though my affinity for cats hadn't changed since the night that my husband...

...and I still felt an unreasoning terror every time I heard a chainsaw start....

I took my red silk blouse out of the closet and stroked it over my forearm. Smooth and slippery as water. It wouldn't pack well — it would wrinkle. I folded it in half, then sat on the bed holding it in my lap, resting my hands on fabric.

Did I really want to leave?

He was always sorry afterward.

This time I had come so close to self-destruction. Could I stay with my husband and survive?

I stroked the blouse, brought it up to touch the silk against my cheek.

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So soft, so almost not there. So much more intense a feeling in its touch, now that I had been there.

My husband would never turn me into clothes again; he had promised. But there would be something else. And something else after that.

I folded up the blouse and put it in the suitcase, then reached into the closet for my favorite comfortable cotton dress.

He came into the room. "What are you doing, Eva?"

I sat down next to my open suitcase. "I don't know," I said.

"Are you leaving?"

"I don't know."

"You're the best wife I ever had," he said. "I don't want to lose you. I hate being between wives; it's hard to find a good one."

This was another thing I had learned only after we married. My husband was more than three thousand years old, and he hadn't spent many years in a single state. I gave up thoughts of jealousy early in our relationship. A waste of energy. Anyway, I could tell that for the present, he was devoted to me.

"For better or for worse doesn't mean what it used to," he said, sitting down beside me.

"Did you treat your other wives the way you treat me?"

"Some of them," he said, "liked it."

"Those were different times," I said.

"Yes."

"Women like that are probably still around. I'm not one of them."

"How can we work this out?" he asked.

When I went to work on Monday it was all I could do to keep it together. I kept wanting to laugh. They're very serious at the law firm where I'm the receptionist, and I knew laughing would get me in trouble. But I couldn't help it.

I managed the morning. I managed my lunch break, even sitting there with Rhoda and eating yogurt and bananas and oranges together. I laughed, but I held it together. It was in the afternoon when I lost it.

Mr. Gill was a dissatisfied client who had come in several times to give me a hard time. I was the one who kept sending him bills, and he

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didn't see why he should pay his lawyer when the judgment had gone against him.

He wasn't physically threatening, but he was always verbally abusive. The partners had told me to call witnesses and cops the next time he came in, but this afternoon I was laughing too hard. He yelled at me and called me names, and I laughed.

Then I pointed at him.

There's no way he can pay us back in his present state, but he gives the office some much needed color. People stop to smell him. I wonder if he likes that.

I'm starting to appreciate my husband's sense of humor more.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH'S LEAD STORY takes us into the near future where we'll encounter aliens that don't bark or bite so much as they just *stink*. Fortunately, the same need not be said of the story itself; in fact, "Ninety Percent of Everything" is a remarkably sweet story from the collaborative triumvirate of Jonathan Lethem, James Patrick Kelly, and John Kessel.

Also on hand next month is "The Queen of Erewhon," a gender-bending SF story from Australian novelist Lucy Sussex. And we've got new stories on tap soon from Scott Bradfield, Albert Cowdrey, Michael Shea, and many many more.

Then in December our cover story will be...what's that? Skipped an issue? Well yes, our October anniversary issue will be a double-sized extravaganza packed with stories by the likes of Robert Sheckley, Lucius Shepard, Ursula Le Guin, Harlan Ellison, Kate Wilhelm, and many more. And yes, we have been spending all year obsessing over the plans for our big birthday celebration. But there's only so much you can fit into 320 pages, and afterwards we'll have plenty more for you in December and into the next decade, great tales of fantasy and science fiction from Eleanor Arnason, Susan Palwick, Dale Bailey, Paul Di Filippo, and lots of writers whose names aren't yet well known. Keep that subscription current and you'll be rewarded with lots and lots of lovely tales.

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Born and raised in Missouri, Wayne Wightman has lived in California for more than three decades. Some of his odd and edgy short stories were collected in Ganglion & Other Stories *a few years ago. Around that same time, he mentioned working on "a nonfiction self-realization book for people who think human beings are evolutionary dead-ends." That work probably influenced this latest story, a fast-moving romp through wild territory.*

The Attack of the Ignoroids

By Wayne Wightman

I, DERRIK RAMSDEN, DO NOT rattle easily. So when old pal Vreedon emptied my bank accounts, leaving me exactly $8.73, did I weep? Did I moan?

Hardly.

I did, however, contact two junkies, give them his address, and tell them that he had five and a half pounds of crack hidden someplace in his apartment. Vreedon, however, is no sloth. He moved too fast for them; he had already vanished, and the junkies, pathetic skinks, got six months for trying to steal the doors and plumbing fixtures.

A month before, Vreedon had told me, "C'mon Ramsden, I need investment capital and I know from hacking around that you've got $9,000 stuck in miserable savings at something like 2.1%. This is heavily big. This is, in short, a *deal!*" He sprawled on my plywood-bottomed sofa drinking my last generic beer and doing a little absent-minded tap-dance, crushing various bugs as they skittered across my floor.

"I'll make us a killing that'll set us up for life. This one, my friend, is a sure thing, and since we've known each other longer than we've known

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anyone but family, I came to you. You, of all people, I came to. You, who live like a roach in this dump. I thought you'd like the chance to move up. Have, you know, like heating, like when you worked at Madame Helga's."

His reference to that singular blot on my employment history was gratuitous and not appreciated. "You have five or six sure things a year, Vreedon, and you're still riding the bus. So what's so majorly big about this one?"

"Trust me. The less you know about it, the better. But the return will be a hundred to one. You give me your $9,000 — a month later, I give you $900,000, minimum. Never work again for the rest of your life."

It tempted me. Selling tombstones to welfare recipients for the last six months dragged down my soul. It made me ask annoying questions about the purpose of life and how to more deeply screw the relatives of the dead. It was immoral, but it was legal. The $9,000 I'd saved plus another year's savings was supposed to be my ticket out of this roach motel.

"No deal, Vreedon. It's too good to be true, however illegal it is."

He lurched forward and sat on the edge of the sofa. "Have I ever screwed you on a deal, Ram?"

"Not since the business with the Hitler sex video, no."

"Jeez. You got no spirit of adventure, Ramsden."

"Right. Poverty ate it."

My next bank statement indicated a total balance of $8.73. He even emptied my checking account.

However, a month later, a package with a lot of strapping tape around it arrived with "Educational Material" stamped several times on the outside.

Inside, in crude bundles of well-used twenties, fifties, and hundreds, I found $915,200. First I was robbed, then I was rich. It took days to sink in. I kept opening the box and studying the bills.

I, Derrik Ramsden, no longer had to look for angles. I could have a life just like before I was disbarred. I was *rich*.

So I moved into a house with coherent walls, actual electrical wiring, and water that came from faucets instead of a garden hose stuck through the kitchen window. And I re-hired the one surviving junkie for my

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houseboy as soon as the Honor Farm released him. His deceased partner, during a religious seizure, had boiled a Bible to get the ink off the pages and had then mainlined the distillate in order to get closer to God, which he did.

Cleetis worked furiously at whatever he did, his little crewcut blond halfwit head devoid of the slightest thought, and he worked for practically nothing except the revolting food he ate in tremendous quantities and the two-room cottage he lived in behind the house.

Life was good. Life was wonderful.

I even had enough life in me to put a few lightweight moves on one Vera Kamchatka, high-school nurse and part-time real estate agent who'd sold me the house.

Then, one morning, there were three dead spots in the front lawn.

"Cleetis! You take a leak on the grass?"

"No boss! Nuh-uh. Not me. I'm a clean guy. I like white porcelain, boss."

"So what's the deal?"

True to form, Cleetis rushed to the front yard and on his hands and knees began poking, smelling, and prodding the dead grass, the little brain in his blond head popping along full speed on a cylinder and a half.

"Burn spot, boss! Done been burned." He stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. "Wumme reseed it?" His little blue eyes jittered inside their sockets. "Do it now, boss? Get some seed and — "

"I want you to keep an eye on the front yard tonight. You can — "

"I get a lawn chair, stay outta sight, they come back, I tap-dance on their jewels, boss, you better believe it, that's right."

"Right, right. You ever sleep Cleetis?"

"Huh?"

About five that afternoon, Vera Kamchatka called to tell me she'd rented my old house, the roach breeding colony.

"*What?* Why? Vera, the deal was to leave it empty a month and see if someone would burn it down — remember? You're in real estate, you're supposed to understand these things."

"There was a good reason. We need to talk about it."

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When she spoke, I could visualize those legs of hers, coming out of her body about three feet below her voice.

"I've got three burn holes in my front yard, still unresolved fears that the IRS is going to ask how I can afford to live in this house, a houseboy who, at this very moment, is out screaming at dogs or something in the front yard, and I need simplicity, Vera, not to be a liable landlord responsible for some human being living in that trap. I could be sued."

Her voice lowered. "Ramsden, I need to talk to you. There have been anomalous occurrences."

I loved it when she talked to me like that.

Still, from the front yard, Cleetis's shrill voice whooped and yapped incoherently.

Enough was enough. I'd fire the half-wit. I didn't need any more strangeness in my life. He kept the place clean but I didn't need someone who stood in the front yard and screamed.

"Vera, I need to go see if Cleetis has hurt himself or if he's just longing for the old days."

"Can you come over this evening?" she asked. "Seven o'clock."

Visions danced in my head. Vera stood an even six feet tall and in her real estate clothes looked like a Detroit parole officer—hair back in a tight black bun, eyes the color of frozen slag, and her thin lips the color of an aluminized rose.

"I'll be th—"

"*Boss!*" Cleetis exploded into the room in a flurry of waving arms, fast breathing, rolling eyes, and a spew of incoherence. "...outside! ...yard!...*whoof!*...jesus! You gotta get out here!"

"Bye, Vera. I'll bring wine."

A dozen steps out the front door, I saw her. A petite dark-skinned woman, standing on my lawn, holding a small bouquet of gardenias in her two hands. She had on some kind of brightly colored wraparound sarong.

"Jesus, another one!" Cleetis screamed, grabbing his face as though it might peel off.

"Misser Ramden?" she said in a thin and reedy voice.

"Look out, boss! Stay back! Don't let her get close to you!"

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"Yeah, I'm Ramsden." I couldn't figure why Cleetis was going moron on me. The little kid probably weighed all of ninety-five pounds.

In the slowly gathering gloom of the fall evening, I saw her grin broadly, her teeth very white with a few gold fillings. "A flower for you, sir." She picked out one of the gardenias and tossed it toward me.

Then little wisps of white smoke started trailing out of her hair and out of the folds of her ankle-length wraparound skirt.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Cleetis screamed at her. "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Cleetis, what's — "

"Stay back, boss! Stay back! She's gonna whoof on us!"

"Goo'bye, Misser Ramsden, goo'bye." Small tongues of flame spurted out of her blouse. One of her gold teeth glittered in the flames. "Goo'bye, Misser Ramsden."

The next instant, her fire billowed out of her clothes and her hair flashburned with a sudden *whoof.*

I, Derrik Ramsden, do not rattle easily, but neither have I ever seen a person self-combust.

I lunged for the garden hose, turned the valve, and when I turned back to spray her, she had vanished.

Dark billows of smoke rolled up into the darker sky. No ashes even. And on my lawn was a fifth burn hole.

And one uncharred gardenia.

CLEETIS RAVED for a few minutes till I hosed him down. He became marginally sober. "Go clean up. When you stop gibbering, we're going to Vera's."

"Uuuuh...uuuuh...."

As an exemplary shallow person Cleetis's emotions run with equivalent depth. Fifteen minutes later he came back out, his little driver's cap on, tossing the car keys in one hand, and humming. "Gotta get grass seed while we're out, boss."

I got in the back seat of the Buick and decided to stop thinking. Vera would distract me.

"Here, boss, this make you feel better." He slipped a cassette of country and western music into the player. Two chords into "Lick My

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Chops" I threatened to report his three parole violations I'd kept track of, and he turned it off.

I do not sympathize with suffering cowboys.

"Ramsden! You're early. And very pale."

"A woman just combusted in my front yard," I said sullenly.

"Two of 'em," Cleetis corrected. "Went up *whoof*, just like that."

I looked at him.

"I'll wait in the car," he said.

Inside, Vera snuggled up to me as much as a six-foot woman can to a guy who's five-ten. She'd taken off her real estate uniform and now wore something that looked like a very expensive poncho, blue-black with a high black embroidered collar. She wrapped her arms around me and breathed in my ear, "Patience dear. Would you like a drink to take the edge off? You do smell a bit smoky," she said.

"Vera, a woman went up in flames in my front yard."

She planted a swift kiss on my sun-cracked lips and left for the kitchen. "I have just what you need. Something without subtlety."

Along with selling houses, Vera was the nurse at a place she referred to as Hormonal High. Her background was nearly as Byzantine as my own. Her degrees were in DNA protein synthesis, but once upon a time she had accepted a job at the infamous Ortho-Nuclear Chemical Dynamics Corporation and been given a fabulous salary. But when a certain presidential candidate was in the death-throes of his campaign and needed a public service scandal to boost his ratings, he revealed the story of Ortho-Nuke's "Project Frankenstein" and Vera ended up selling pieces of quadraplexes to white trash and bandaging bite-wounds on juveniles.

I flopped on her black leather sofa. This evening, what with having witnessed a death by fire, it was hard to focus on that which stood before my eyes — the semi-transparent silk poncho she wore and her loose hair that seemed to fly around her head like weather patterns.

Money was supposed to make life make sense, not make me mental.

"You rented my old house to someone," I called to her. "I was hoping the neighborhood kids would burn it down. Only way I'll get any money out of it."

She came out of the kitchen with a huge goblet half filled with pale

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green slush. A sheet of paper covered the top and she carried it very carefully.

"Here." She held it under my nose and slid off the paper. "Breathe deeply."

I did.

Everything changed. The world brightened. My cares became less world-shaking. I even managed to notice as she stood with the light behind her that the blue-black thing she wore was the only thing she wore.

"Gee," I said.

"Nice cold nitrous oxide hovering over vodka-lime slush. Feel better now?"

"Yeah...I could watch people spontaneously combust all day. Okay," I said, "what is it you said we need to talk about? I assume it's bad news. What's the worst news you can give me? Do it before this wears off."

She sat beside me and laid her long fingers along the side of my neck. "A few weeks after you bought the new house, something unusual happened at school. We have a fundamentalist science teacher there named Zick. He was having his kids do individual science projects, and one of his Lao-Haitian kids brought in his grandfather as his project."

I took a few deep breaths of clean air. There seemed to be several serious non sequiturs in what she was telling me. A fundamentalist Zick? A grandfather project?

"You're blinking a lot," she said.

"I'm all right. Speak more. If it doesn't all come together in a minute, I'll let you know."

"Well, in his own brand of English, the old man started telling them that there was a new disease starting right here in Santa Miranda and that soon it would affect nearly everyone with some very bad consequences. Zick apparently liked this news since it fit in with several Biblical verses he always recites about the end of the world."

"Vera, although you have amazing legs, you're making the world seem very complex right now."

"I know, dear. Keep your random access memory alive a minute longer." She recrossed her legs. I'd never seen past her knees before. She had great muscles in there. "As soon as the old guy told them that it was sexually transmitted — and I gather he did this with some kind of Laotian

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hand gestures — Zick went ape and did a lot of yelling. Now this last part I don't know what to make of, but it was enough to cause Zick to evacuate his class and to call the police. Are you hyperventilating?"

"He did *what* in his class?"

"He evacuated his class, he didn't evacuate *in* class."

I was relieved, although the post-digestive image remained in my mind.

"But what evidently drove Zick over the edge was that the old man kept saying, 'reality fucks generators.' Over and over. Zick couldn't shut him up, so he called the police."

One of her unrestrained breasts, I suddenly realized, was resting on the back of my hand. Heavily resting on the back of my hand. With only an eighth of a millimeter of fabric between me and her actual warm breasticular flesh.

"Vera," I said, "My concentration isn't what it was two minutes ago. Before I pass out, I want you to tell me what this crazy old man has to do with me? Why are you tormenting me with this story?"

"I must've got too much nitrous in your glass." She moved closer and rested one hand on the back of my neck. The breast remained on my hand. "I'm telling you this," she said soothingly, "because when the police came, he said his head hurt and asked for 'the nurse.' And when he saw me, he smiled, bowed politely, said he felt fine, and asked if he could rent your house. Also, five or six times, he said 'Mr. Ramden come see me, get to keep money.' His name is Khamphang LaNuit-Gomez."

That brought me around. I even forgot what was on my hand. "Keep my money? And he knew my name? And asked to rent my house? It's got to be the Internal Revenue Service. They found out somehow. Vreedon squealed — it has to be Vreedon. The way the IRS manipulate these foreigners is despicable. They probably offered this Fang person a job at a taco stand if he'd pull this stunt." My vision began going grainy around the edges.

For the first month in four years I didn't have to eat macaroni and beans six times a week, and now, whatever else all this meant, it meant I was involved, and I didn't want to be involved with anything where people burned up and talked about my money and the police asked questions.

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"Well," she said, "given my experience in the federal sector, your paranoia may not be unwise. However, with his knowing you and his implied threat to your money, I thought I should rent it to him for a couple of months. And this disease thing is something he shouldn't have known about." Her voice turned dark and low. "It's very ominous, Derrik."

For the second time in a single minute, my blood ran cold. "What disease?"

She patted my shoulder sympathetically. "STS, dear. Neither one of us has it, but as another in the long series of sexually transmitted diseases that are turning up, it's ominously fascinating. The best guess is that it causes microscopic lesions in the prefrontal cortex and perhaps a subtle but widespread deterioration of the limbic system. Probably a virus. It — "

"I have it, don't I. This is why you gave me this drink and why you're telling me this complicated story, to confuse me — so I'll think I'm okay till I wake up in the morning and it all sinks in. Go ahead and say it. I get a little money and two months later, I'm going to die."

"No, dear."

She wrapped her nurse-realtor's hands around my face, turned me to face her, and gave me a kiss that rearranged my priorities...lips and the touch of her tongue across my teeth...it felt like god had spoken to me.

"I'd never kiss someone who had a transmissible disease, Mr. Ramsden."

"I've been celibate for a year and a half," I said truthfully. "By choice," I lied.

"Yummy," she said. Then she shifted gears. "The Atlanta Centers for Disease Control already have two people here and others across the state — very quietly, of course — and they're officially calling it STPL. Sexually transmitted pre-frontal lesions. But unofficially they're calling it STS — sexually transmitted stupidity, and it's no joke. It's one of those very mean viruses that evidently popped up out of nowhere, and the biggest problem they're going to have, when they have to announce it to the public, is to convince them that it's real After all, stupid people are the hardest ones to convince that they're stupid."

"STS?"

Her hair swirled when she nodded.

"How stupid does it make a person?"

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"Some of the teachers at school are convinced that the kids have a conspiracy going where one by one they pretend to forget how to read anything over about fourth grade level."

"What are they complaining for? That's enough to graduate, isn't it?"

"To get out of high school they have to read at fifth grade level. It could cost the school a lot of money — and cause a reevaluation of the staff. Outside school, in the real world, all you have to do is pick up the paper."

She leaned over the arm of the sofa and pulled a sheaf of newspaper from under an end table.

"'Burglar Caught Napping — Beaten Into Coma.' He broke into a house with the apparent intention of stealing the refrigerator shelves but stopped to eat and went to sleep on the sofa. The owner came back and nearly killed him. Owner's in jail now." She turned a page. "'Teen Gives Birth In Class, Thinks Baby Alien Parasite.' After it was explained that it was a baby, *her* baby, she became quite maternal."

"You think these people are stupid? They sound like degree candidates to me."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Okay. How about this." She pulled out a half-size section of newsprint. "'What's Hot, What's Not.' It's part of a teen-oriented insert the paper does. You might need something to bite on for this one."

"I've lived with insects, remember."

"According to this, branding is hot. 'As a gesture of bonding, young adults now use soldering irons and decorative branding irons to mark each other at branding parties. Popular patterns include pitchforks, flames, hamburgers, and the Nike swoosh.'" She smiled. "They do it on tender parts."

I felt my nostrils involuntarily flare. But what the hell. Kids will be kids.

"What's also hot-self-surgery. 'Popular operations include removing the last joint of the little toe, drying it, and giving it to a loved one to wear around the neck.' You'll appreciate this one: 'And what could be more intimate than a sealed jewel of your loved one's intestinal effluent inserted sub-cutaneously between the eyebrows?'"

"That's hideous! Even Cleetis would be repelled."

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"That's fashion. Also what's hot — cranial transducers."

I must have looked blank.

"Sixteen kids in my health classes have cranial transducers. They jack their CD players right into this thing that's screwed into their skull. Makes their skulls vibrate. They say the bass is excellent After a few hundred hours of that, they need friends to wipe their chins. That's STS."

The whole thing gave me the creeps — self-mutilation as a party sport, purposeful brain damage — but why should I care? Teenagers are famous for annoying their elders. She read my mind.

"You should care, Derrik, because Khamphang LaNuit-Gomez has your number. Khamphang both knew about STS *and* wanted to rent your specific house. He knew your name. He knows something about your money, which I, fortunately, do not know about. Put that together with the burning woman in your yard, and I'd say you have an interesting situation developing."

"There's only one thing to do," I said, "and that's to get my hands on this Fang person and find out who put him up to it."

"After school tomorrow, I'll go with you. I'd like to know what he meant by 'reality fucks generators.'"

"I'm not going to wait till tomorrow — I'm going now. He's probably in bed, sleeping like a child, and if there's one thing I've learned in life, if you want to get a straight answer, catch them with their pants down. It's harder to lie when you're naked, except when you're sexually aroused."

"In point of fact, Mr. Ramsden, you're looking a bit peaked at the moment."

"Nothing energizes me like the search for truth." I stood up and got to the door. "I'll sleep tomorrow," I said heroically.

She followed me to her front step. Out in the car I could hear country music playing softly.

"Actually," I said to her, "I feel like a piece of flank steak. But it's hard to get to sleep when somebody's about to pull your plug."

"So well I know."

I went down the walk and looked back once as I got in the back seat of the car. I could dream about those legs later.

Cleetis turned off the car lights and we coasted to a stop in front of the

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dump where I used to live. The neighborhood was a mix of the three races and nine or ten nationalities. The kids all played together during the day, but at night the older ones came out to rob and stomp anyone with an accent different from their own. At this hour, the houses were locked like vaults and the street was dark except for a few windows dimly lit by low-wattage bulbs.

"Bet you glad you don't live here nomore," Cleetis whispered. "You gonna roust this old guy? You want me to help? I could go screamin' at the back door— "

I studied the dark front of the house, but nothing looked unusual "Two things, Cleetis. First, stay in the car. Second, no music. Keep your ears open."

"You think this old guy has a gun?"

"Who knows. He may be in there with a houseful of flamers." I got out of the car while Cleetis breathed heavily.

"I don't want nothing to do with no flamers, boss. They unnerve me."

"Pretend it's lights-out on the cell block, Cleetis. Watch for creepers."

He shuddered as I left him.

The front door was open behind the screen door, and the breeze that blew through the house smelled like seaweed. I drew back my hand to knock and the porch light next to my face flared like a runway beacon.

"Herrow, Mr. Ramden," said a shadowy face on the other side of the screen. "Make self inside." He turned on a ceiling light and pushed the screen open. "I have expected you."

Khamphang LaNuit-Gomez was old, sunken-chested, and had a neat rim of bristly white hair around his head. He wore a clean white T-shirt, baggy faded blue pants, and rubber thongs. The living room had three things in it arranged in a triangle: a thrift-shop sofa, a portable TV on the floor, and a wooden kitchen chair. He gestured politely to the chair. He sat in the middle of his earthtone houndstooth sofa and looked like a stick-man with his ankles crossed, his clasped hands between his knees, and a big smile on his crinkly face. "So nice I see you, Mr. Ramden."

There were no wires or unusual attachments on the kitchen chair, so I sat down. We stared at each other a few seconds. I wanted to make the old guy uneasy, but it wasn't working. He grinned and nodded to me.

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"You may ask first question," he said.

"Do you work for the IRS?"

"No," he said crisply.

"Who do you work for?"

"Want to work for *you*."

I noted that he didn't answer the question. "Well," I said, "I probably could use some help fixing up the burn holes in my yard. Next question: Why did the woman burn up in front of me today?"

"Because to make you pay attention. I want to see you soon, Mr. Ramden. We have very interesting problem. You can help."

"You burned up this woman so I would come here? Why didn't you use the phone? You know, give me a call. You think because I'm a landlord I don't have compassion? That I don't have feelings? If you wanted to make an impression, you could've sent flowers or a few good stock tips."

"Didn't kill woman," he said. "Those fire people, you not really see what you think you see. We wanted to make *big* impression."

"So I'm impressed enough to be here. Speak."

"There a problem with reality fucks generators."

"Really. Well, reality does that to all of us every now and then. Look, Fang, I can appreciate your having hard times, but if you want to get your rent reduced, double-talk won't help. And if you keep turning people into charcoal briquettes, or whatever the hell it is you're doing, you could find yourself back in Port-au-Prince providing a little entertainment for the ton-ton police."

He looked worried. That was a good sign.

"Excuse moment please." He was up and back into the kitchen before I could stop him. For an old man, he moved fast. I positioned myself by the door in case he returned with armaments.

He came back holding one of those ninety-five cent Wal-Mart dictionaries, thumbing through it as he went back to the sofa.

"Here," he said, pointing to a word. "Look. Reality fucks generators."

I leaned over to look at the extended book and the word he pointed to was *flux*.

"Reality *flux* generators?" I asked.

His face lit up. "Jess!" he said, nodding vigorously.

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I was getting the feeling that rent reduction wasn't on his mind. I had been hoping for something simple for a change, fool that I was.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, Fang, what is a reality flux generator?"

"It be what we want you to rejust for us. It keep things running same way all the time, smoothly," he said pleasantly, his eyebrows raised, "and sometimes, generators mess up, need be rejusted. All things attach to all things. Generator in center of...." He searched for a word, then his face lit up. "Generator in center of center. When generator go out on whack, bad things happen, you know? Like people get disease, go nuts. You like a beer, Mr. Ramden?"

"Certainly, Mr. Fang."

Deciding to humor him, while he was in the kitchen, I called out, "So why don't you get yourself a wrench and adjust these things yourself?"

"Not able," he said, coming back into the room with a couple of Sun Lik beers for us. "I — "

There was a crash through the side window right next to me, glass sprayed across the floor, and a rock glumped on the floor with a piece of paper duct-taped to it. I thought people were supposed to use string on such things.

"Neighbors," he said. He handed me the rock and said, "You read."

I peeled off the tape. The note looked like it had been written by someone who held his crayon like a butter knife. It said, "Gokes go bake were you cam frome!!!" but I didn't read it aloud.

"Don't have to tell me. I know what it say," he said. "See? People get stupid more faster. Stupid sex sickness go person to person — two then four then eight, then everybody. Nobody help nobody, people do bad stuff all over, first kill Kampuchea, Rwanda, Serbia, kill whole world — all because of stupid sickness go person to person jiggy-jig." He made a Lao-Haitian hand-gesture that looked pretty universal to me. "Mr. Ramden must fix generators."

"Go fix these reality flux generators yourself, Fang. Why me? A wrench costs three bucks. I'll deduct it from your rent."

"You fix," he said, giving me a dismissive wave of his hand and taking a long pull from his beer. "I too old. Beside, I don't have car." He grinned and pointed a gnarled finger at me. "I know you, Mr. Ramden. You sold tombstone to family, say spirits must be held down by *big* stone — cost

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much much money. But then you come back next day and give half money back. You crazy white guy. Heh-heh! Good crazy, Mr. Ramden."

"If it's any comfort to you, Fang, I came back the next day to sell you another one — but you were gone and I didn't think the little kid you left behind could close the deal." My professional training allowed me to lie like a teenager.

Fang shook his head and chuckled. Why was I losing this one so fast?

I swilled off the Sun Lik. "Let me phrase it this way, Fang. My reality's been fine till your friends started wrecking my lawn. Thanks for the beer."

He thumbed madly through his dictionary and pointed to another word.

"*Monitor,*" I read.

"Yes." He did his grin again. "Monitor. Khamphang is monitor."

"And what does that mean?"

"Mean Khamphang responsible for fucks generators here. You fix them, sickness go away."

"Thanks for the beer, Fang." I stood up. "I'll have the window fixed. In the meantime, I'll call you sometime. We can do lunch. Later."

I didn't even wait to see the expression on his face. The guy had been up late a lot of nights to dream up that one. If he wasn't with the IRS, he was probably involved in some kind of rent scam invented in a Phnom Penh basement.

Once I got to the car, I looked in and couldn't see my driver.

"Cleetis?"

He climbed up out of the floor of the front seat. "Are they gone, boss?"

"You mean Fang's friends who threw the rock through the window? Yeah, they're gone."

"Those weren't no friends, boss. Those was six guys in ski masks carrying ax handles."

"Let's go home, Cleetis."

"God damn right, boss."

We lost about 15,000 miles of rubber by the time we got there. In the moonlight except for the dead spots, my new home, complete with water and electricity, looked wonderful. And sane.

Inside, I fell across the bed with my clothes on and was asleep by the second bounce.

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Somebody talked to me. I had been dreaming Vera's legs wrapping around me, but somewhere now, a voice talked to me.

"...so the question of the hour is, 'How did Socrates know that he was living in 400 BC? I sure don't know the answer to that brain twister, so call in if you know the answer because one of our listeners is *real* puzzled! Hey, am I supposed to know everything? Am I Eisenstein? Give us a call, gang." I faded out and faded back in to hear the same voice talking about a NASA probe that had landed on the outskirts of Heaven and brought back voodoo germs which would cause worldwide attention deficit disorder.

When I finally got my eyes open, I saw it was my radio talking to me, so I hit the button on top to keep from being more depressed about the human condition than I already was. Money gave you time to brood about things like that.

I had a few cups of coffee at the kitchen table and went through the mail while Cleetis scrubbed the tile grout on the drain board with a toothbrush. He wore his cassette player and earphones while he worked, but I could still hear the dismal moan of his suffering cowboys as they lamented their girlfriends getting snaked by out-of-state truck drivers and other large animals. If this STS thing was real, Cleetis must have dipped in at the source...an ugly thought.

The mail was typical...except for a postcard with a picture of wheat fields on the front side. On the back, down at the bottom, it was signed by Vreedon. That gink.

The writing was microscopic. I started at the top.

Dear Ramsden,

Well, it finally happened. I never even got to my plane. I had the cargo in my car trunk, and all of a sudden, this Fed lays his bazooka through my window and says, "Howdy." All in all, it might be for the best. How was I to know that stuff in the boxes wasn't Gatorade? I thought they were paying quite a lot just for transportation, but I figured what the hell, soldiers down in Paraguay get thirsty too. However, if I'd landed too hard, they'd been able to see the fireball from Waikiki. C4 shouldn't be flown in DC-3's with bad suspension. Nobody tells me anything. A good thing you didn't invest. Uncle took everything,

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plane, bucks, everything. See you in six months. (I had a good lawyer.) New add: #41-82-0503, Box 42346, Leavenworth, KS.

Yrs. Vreedon

I swallowed hard. Vreedon never got off the ground? Vreedon never took my savings? Vreedon was in Leavenworth?

I roused Cleetis from his grout and told him to go scrub the spots on the driveway. While he was in front, I got a shovel and dug up one of the boxes in the garden where I kept a major chunk of the cash.

Guess what.

It wasn't there.

The three thousand bucks of mad money I had taped under the sink — gone. The inch of 50s inside the radio — gone. I was about to pull up the carpet in the bedroom where I'd hidden a layer of 100s when I heard Cleetis shrieking at me from the front of the house.

I really didn't want to see that black-haired kid, eighteen or nineteen years old, standing there with a shy grin on his face, one finger in his mouth and a scraggly bouquet of gardenias in the crook of his other arm.

Cleetis yelled at him, "G'won! Scram! My god it's another one! We don't want nothing. *Boss!* Go 'way! *Boss!*"

The kid just stood there.

I figured what the hell. I had to go outside sooner or later, so I stepped out on the porch.

Just like I'd touched a match to him, he started to smoke. His Hawaiian shirt crinkled up, turned a light brown and flash-burned. "Howdy, goo'bye," the kid said with that same weird grin as the woman the night before. He tossed a gardenia in my direction and it landed smoldering on the lawn. Cleetis looked at me with mad-dog terror in his eyes.

"Howdy, goo'bye," the kid said again as close to his body he burned a yellow-white and was surrounded by a flickering orange aura.

"You'd better get out of the way, Cleetis." I could feel the heat from where I stood.

Then the kid whoofed off like a hundred pounds of loosely wrapped black powder. Billows of gray smoke swooshed over the front porch, the yard, the car, and Cleetis.

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When the breeze finally carried it away, I saw Cleetis standing there on the edge of the drive, staring at the new burn hole in the lawn. Now there were six dead spots in the yard. He looked up at me in open-mouthed wonder.

No ashes, and one smoldering gardenia.

"Better buy a big bag of grass seed while we're out today," I said. "And we need to go see that new tenant again."

As I stepped back inside the house, I realized I was in my underwear. These were not amateurs I was dealing with.

They had caught me with my pants off.

AS WE DROVE deeper into the slum sections, I couldn't help but notice that a lot of people were milling around for that time of day. Despite the very warm morning, a lot of them seemed to be wearing shorts with overcoats. Poor fashion sense did not seem to be the reason.

"These people," Cleetis called back over his shoulder, "they make me uneasy. They got instruments of havoc under them coats, boss, you can count on it"

"Just keep the windows up and the motor running at all times."

"Yo boss."

When I was in college I wrote a paper on the inverse relationship between ambient temperature and intelligence — up to 102, the hotter it gets, the more people act like hitleroids, and all those lumpy overcoats on a day like this did not bode for happy times. We still had a few minutes before we got to Fang's, so I thought I'd check in with Vera and see if her voice was as sexy as I remembered.

"Cleetis, gimme the phone."

"Atlanta CDC sent in six more people last night on a charter plane," she said. "Two are in Sacramento, two in Merced, and two more here in Santa Miranda. Significant populations as far away as Denver are starting to act up — and probably in LA, although aside from the increase in freeway killings, it's hard to tell down there. Where are you calling from?"

"The Buick. I'm on my way to Fang's. We've been passing a lot of mugger-types standing around with ax handles and motorcycle chains

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hanging out the bottoms of their overcoats. Maybe your Atlanta people are on to something."

'I thought you saw Khamphang last night."

"I did. We got nowhere. This guy's been on Mars too long."

Cleetis suddenly swerved to miss some guy who had stopped in the middle of the street to look at something he'd picked out of his teeth.

"What was all that swearing?" Vera asked.

"Never mind. We're under control now. I have to go — we're almost there."

"Listen," she said. "It still troubles me that Khamphang knew about STS — very few people have that information — and he knew. Don't take this guy lightly."

"Don't worry."

I opened the rear-seat glove box and poured myself a drink of Acceler-Oh! from the thermos — a completely legal synaptic transport enhancer, prescribed for me by one of the finest pharmacists in Tijuana. I hadn't been getting a lot of restful sleep lately, and there was an off-chance Fang might try doing a "Howdy, goo'bye" on me if I didn't participate in his psychotic notions about "reality flux generators." In a closed room I wanted to be able to respond with great rapidity. If I was lucky, the house would go up in flames along with him, and I could finally collect on the insurance.

This Fang person had wanted my attention, and now he was going to get it — Derrik Ramsden, moving quickly, mind like teal strap.

"Be inside," he said graciously. "Welcome, Mr. Ramden. You come to 'just reality generators this morning?" He bowed and nodded his little white-bristled head like I was a wonderful person.

The place smelled funny. On top of the odor of fish was something else. I looked around. Yes, on top of the odor of fish was the odor of burned curtains.

"What happened?"

"Gentlemen returned after throwing rock and threw fire into curtain."

"You may have to wait for me to get them fixed," I said. "That's a special-order item and costs measurable money, which is something I seem to be without at the moment. Get my drift? Comprendo?"

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"Si, yes. Money gone from all hiding places. You like ice tea?"

"I like my money back, Fang."

"*Our* money," Fang said. "Get back very easy."

I was starting to feel like a stray dog who'd been coaxed into the gas chamber. If this guy wasn't working for the IRS, he had read their manuals.

"*Your* money?" I said stupidly.

"We let you enjoy it a while, then take away. Make you hungry, huh."

"You set up Vreedon in this, didn't you? He's in prison because you set us both up."

"Oh yes, but get out soon, with your help. He get good lawyer. Or you sell tombstone again to welfare people. Neighbor across street about to die," he added idly. "Could be first sale of new life."

I gazed past him out the window. It was such a pretty day, the sun rose mindlessly through the trees, the birds sang their little hearts out, hunted worms, and ate each other's young, the muggers strolled peaceably through the streets, waiting for the temperature to go up. And I was looking at a major lifestyle demotion.

"Okay, Fang," I said, snapping my mind back to what currently seemed like the real world. I sat down. I figured I should say something tough. "Who do you want me turn into chunk style?"

"Ah," he said, giving me his big squinty smile. "No one need to be messed up. Only need you to 'just reality generators. Very easy. No sweat. Piece of nice cake. Without 'justment, people get very very bad stupid. Then...." He shrugged up his shoulders and flipped his hands outward. The gesture for hopelessness was apparently the same in both our cultures.

I nodded my head and tried to keep the desolation out of my voice. "I do this and you get Vreedon out and my money...*your* money reappears in my possession."

"Oh yes. Very easy. Take maybe hour only."

"Fine. How about one of those Sun Liks while you tell me about it."

You know those dreams where you're standing in your living room, say, petting a dog...and then the dog turns into an ex-wife that tries to chew the face off your head? You know it's impossible, but there it is. It can't be, but it's happening anyway, and if you don't believe it, a full set of teeth is going to snag the eyes right out of your face.

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That's what was happening to me. After being disbarred, I had always thought there were limits to the lunacy I would get involved in. The sun also rises, but the wangers are out there twenty-four hours a day.

Everything is connected to everything else, he said. And at vital points there are these reality flux generators which were disguised as ordinary objects. These generators, Fang said, were scattered around by persons or beings unknown, and generations ago his people had been chosen to monitor the things, to try to keep reality running smoothly.

That's what he said. He had my money, so who was I to argue?

His were a chosen people, he said. *His* people, he said. Lao-Haitians? I asked. Well, not exactly, he said. They were from a lot of places, but...well...they weren't really what you'd call Lao-Haitians. Martians, I suggested. Well...not really.

These generators, he said, control the way things happen. They "went out on whack" in Cambodia, he said with a smile, and they couldn't get people to adjust them in the right way at the right time, so his country turned into a mausoleum janitored by Khmer Rouge thrill-killers. Now, he said, the generators here are going out on whack here and would I please help.

Certainly I would, I told him, for the remaining eight hundred thousand bucks, if it only took an hour.

"No, no, not eight hunderd thousand," he said, causing my blood to run cold. "With quick investment, now million three."

My blood warmed quickly. He had my money, after all, and if he could put Vreedon in Leavenworth as a hostage, the man was not to be abused.

"I'm all ears."

"Generators disguised as ordinary things," he said. "Big one near here look like old car in field, over by school, Madison and Spruce Streets."

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"Move old car."

"And that's going to make this stupid disease go away, I'll get the money back, and Vreedon gets out of Leavenworth?"

"Yes true."

"Anybody could do this, Fang. Why me? It's too easy. There has to be a booby trap here. If you expect me to go for this, Fang, you're crazy."

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"Had to be someone. Today, it be you. And you very poor, Mr. Ramden."

Fang had an intimate understanding of fate and human motivation.

CLEETIS TWITCHED morbidly, but he promised to do what I said. I didn't see any reason to smother the poor man with details, so I just told him we were going to do some precision car-ramming. The destructive aspect cheered him up a little, but when he heard the location, he became abject.

On our way over to the junked car, I called Vera to listen to her voice again

"Listen," she said, "we may have bad problems soon. The Lieutenant Governor has just been on television talking about how mediocre citizens are not fully represented in government. He wants to establish a department of mediocrity."

"Can he even spell it?"

"He's going to call it the Department of Ordinary People — DOPe. He also said that at his next press conference he would only take questions from women in black hose with a seam up the back."

"Vera, I've got business to attend to. You may not believe this, but I suspect aliens disguised as Lao-Haitians have robbed me blind and sent Vreedon to Leavenworth."

There was a long pause. "You should come in to the clinic for a blood workup when you have time."

"I'm serious."

"It's sexually transmitted, Ramsden. We'll need a history."

"There is no history. Since I was disbarred, my sexual history is as barren as the Sahara — well, with the exception of one small oasis, which, I might add, turned out to be an illusion." I was babbling. Fortunately I stopped short of detailing my stay at Madame Helga's, as a janitor. Maybe I *was* infected. "Never mind," I said and hung up. "*Drive*, Cleetis, *fast.*"

I had to get my money back and convince Vera I was clean, even if I had to save the world to do it.

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* * *

So this, I thought, was a reality flux generator. It looked to me like another junked car, a rusted out Ford Fairmont with no windows or doors, and long ago, someone had burned the seats down to the springs. It lay in a weedy lot with an auto upholstery shop on one side and an abandoned health food restaurant on the other. The problem with moving the car like Fang had said wouldn't be with the car—it would be with the six guys who loitered next to it, roasting weenies over a can of burning gasoline. One of them had a medium-sized chainsaw and sat on a spool of yellow electrical cord.

Fang had been very precise: move it one foot north and eighteen inches southwest.

When I gave Cleetis his assignment, he started some lightweight blubbering. "Don't make me do this, boss. I could smash three, four of those bums there, and I'm on parole, and if I get questioned...." Saliva glistened on his lips. "We already had one person blow up on us today, boss. We could run out of luck."

"Luck? We don't need luck. Everything I do is calculated down to the short hairs. Luck is for wimps." I reached forward and patted him on the shoulder. "Cleetis, have I ever steered you wrong?"

"No boss."

"And you have a nice little cottage behind the house you can call all your own, right?"

"Yes boss."

"It's much bigger than a jail cell, isn't it."

He turned and stared at me. Fear choked off his blubbering.

"You get evenings off every now and then, I let you drive my car, and when was the last time some guy with tattoos whispered sweet somethings in your ear?"

"Yeah," he said defiantly, "but those guys in the joint didn't have no chainsaws."

"Look again, Cleetis. It's an *electric* chainsaw. We'll just keep our distance from any outlets."

"But they got extension cords, boss, big ones! Lookit that spool that guy's sittin' on!"

"I have a telephone here, Cleetis, and your parole officer is on

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insta-dial, button number three. Don't tell me you're going to flush our relationship."

He whimpered like a newbie at Madame Helga's. "Boss, you make life so difficult!"

"I wouldn't ask you to just run them down, Cleetis. They're human beings, after all, and deserve something more stylish. This is only a Buick. All you have to do is stroll over and tell them there's a liquor store being looted on the next street."

"Boss, I can't do that, boss — "

"Make the move, Cleetis, or I hit button number three."

His nerves stuttered and his head bobbled erratically.

"Cleetis," I said softly. "This hesitation is beginning to make me nervous."

He opened the door and the guys with the chainsaw looked up from their blackening weenies.

"Remember," I said. "Look excited. Look *happy*."

I never was clear about what went wrong. Whenever I asked him what he said, he started whining. I wouldn't be surprised if the little knob offered them money to jump me.

Cleetis kind of half ran and half shuffled across the lot to the guys and I could hear him saying something to them, but halfway there, he turned around and ran full-tilt back to the car, and the one with the chainsaw ran after him while another one dragged the plug end of the cord across the lot to the auto upholstery shop. The chainsaw buzzed to life. I never knew how threatening one of those things looked close up.

Of course, Cleetis had trouble starting the car, and by that time the guy had scratched up the windshield pretty badly by trying to saw through it.

Giving up on the window, he went after the front grill, but the chain jammed in the metal and the saw whipped him around like a rag before it threw him under the car.

Cleetis proved unreliable. He sat up there slapping at the steering wheel and going "Nuhh, nuhh, nuhh" and grinding the gears and stalling out the engine while the other guys hammered on the car roof with their fists, screamed at us through the windows, and pulled their friend out from under the front of the car.

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When I saw one of them rev up the saw and start to go for the tires, I figured it was time to get involved.

"Cleetis!" I screamed over the racket of the saw, "I'm going to get you out of this mess you got us into and I don't ever want to hear any backtalk from you. You get my message?"

"Nuhh! Nuhh!"

"I'll take that as a yes."

I opened up the back-seat glovebox and took out the plastic bag of baking soda I kept for such emergencies. I shoved open the back door and shouted, "Free coke!" and gave it a twenty-foot heave away from us. It splattered on a crumbled slab of asphalt.

They swarmed it like piranhas.

"Very good," I yelled after them. "Excuse us, please."

Cleetis had started the car, but he wept like an old virgin. "I can't do it, boss. It's my nerves. I can't do it. You carryin' around kilos of coke, people try to hack me up with a chainsaw, it don't make no sense!"

"C'est la vie, Cleetis. Just think of those tattooed arms that want to embrace you. Think of those whiskered lips crooning jail house lullabies in your ear."

"Stop it, boss!" he wept. "Stop it, god, christ." The Buick rumbled to life. "Okay, I'll do it, whatever," he said wimpily.

"Hit that car from the rear," I said. "Try to jounce it about a foot forward."

While he circled behind it, I snapped on the restraining harness. "It's on its rims, so hit it a good one."

The guys with the chainsaw watched us dispassionately while they snorkeled baking soda and vomited on each other. No doubt life must have seemed quite mysterious to them.

Cleetis rear-ended it at about twenty-five miles an hour and the old Fairmont scooted forward about eight inches. "Push it," I commanded him. "Move it a tad more." He made high-pitched whining noises, but he did it.

"Okay now. Circle around and come at it at an angle, hit it on the right front corner. I want about a foot and a half movement this time. Use your own judgment about the speed."

What a mistake.

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What a half-witted thing to say to someone with limited cognitive abilities and the intelligence of a bright hamster. Suggesting that he use his judgment was like telling a toaster oven to wash the car.

He got the car in position well enough, but then he floored it, ripping out parallel ditches through the empty lot, and screamed, "I can't take it no more! I can't take it! I gotta go back to jail." And then we hit hard enough that I thought I was going to be diced through the harness.

The Fairmont leaped sideways, knocked over the can of burning gasoline I had so carelessly disregarded, and we were engulfed in flames.

"I gonna die! I gonna die!" Cleetis shrilled, flailing his hands at the windshield.

I didn't like seeing orange flames and black smoke lapping at the windows. Burning to death with a screaming moron was the sort of thing that made me re-evaluate my life's priorities. It seemed time to inject a little gentility into my driver's demeanor, whatever crude methods it might require. We were, after all, on the cusp of burning to death.

With both hands I got a good tight grip on the skin on each side of his scrawny little white neck. He stopped screaming long enough that I explained the situation clearly: "Put the car in reverse," I said into his ear, "or your brain will die right here, right now."

In seconds we were away from the conflagration. As we sped out of the lot and banged over the curb, I saw the guys with baking soda all over their upper lips slapping their legs and pointing at us, choking with laughter.

People who laugh at the misfortunes of others should be on welfare the rest of their lives.

"Okay," I said. "Take us to Fang's. We've got bucks to collect."

At last things were winding down, but Cleetis started whining again. I looked up but didn't see anything.

"Behin' us, boss, look behin' us."

One glance and I realized that Cleetis was doing a very good job dealing with his feelings. Perhaps I had misjudged him after all.

"Burn rubber, Cleetis!"

Pouring out of the rat-trap houses, out the corner groceries, and out of side streets stormed dozens — maybe hundreds — of kitchen-knife-waving, raving, club-carrying, shrieking, gap-toothed, half-witted ignoroids,

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and I couldn't tell where all of them were going, but some of them were definitely going after us.

My head lolled back when Cleetis floored it, and when the turbocharger kicked in, I felt my corneas flatten out and my eyeballs squeeze toward the back of my head.

Something about them struck chords in me that went back to the Pleistocene. They swarmed off the sidewalks ahead of us, everywhere, crawling over cars, over each other, like insects, like vermin.

Cleetis took a corner on the sidewalls of two wheels, and I saw something that made me desire the company of Madame Helga: Five or six blocks behind us, roughly over the vacant lot where we had knocked around the old car, there hovered a vast black cloud. And it wasn't just *black* — it was so dark it looked like the absence of light, like a chunk of the interstellar void had been dropped on us. Around the vortex, the air started to spark, as though with a little more incentive, it could ignite. This whole ugly mess was Not Good.

"Cleetis! Change of course: get us back to my house!" It seemed to be the right time for some restful contemplation of what the hell was coming loose and a relaxing IV of white rum. "Jesus, Cleetis! Slow down — keep it under eighty."

Back at the intersection where we had turned, people were emptying from their houses and old laundromats and liquor stores and running toward the vacant lot, and, I noticed, these people didn't look quite as psychotic as the first wave we saw. Maybe there was a pattern here, but I sincerely hoped it was somebody else's job to figure out what it was.

"Bad news, boss!" He was pointing to a flash off to the side but I missed it — however, I didn't miss the next one. Little saronged or Hawaiian-shirted people stood at the curb every thirty or forty feet, all of them holding bouquets of gardenias, and every time we got near one of them, they burst into flames and exploded in a fireball of heat and smoke.

"Sweet creeping jesus! Hit the brakes! Stop!"

We fishtailed through an intersection, up across the sidewalk, and took out a couple of newspaper boxes. Ten feet ahead of us stood a grinning young girl, maybe twelve years old, in purple pants and a yellow-flowered shirt. She held an armful of gardenias and I could tell by the look in her eyes, she was just waiting to go up in smoke.

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I rolled down the window and yelled at her, "It's okay, don't do anything, all right? We're on our way to talk to Fang."

She nodded deeply. "Goo' idea," she said.

"Reverse course, Cleetis. Take us to the Fang man."

People in this area were starting to emerge from their dens, coming out on the sidewalk and gazing up at the sky at the spinning funnel cloud of black. Gradually they began strolling in that direction.

It was idle speculation on my part, but I had begun to think that reality really had been fluxed and that I had had something to do with it.

I tried calling Vera on the car-phone, but when she answered there was a great turbulence of sound in the background, much like I would imagine wailing and gnashing of teeth might sound, and I barely made out her shouting into the phone, "...lunatics all over the...have guns...call back later...." and a disconnect.

Fang sat out in his front yard on a kitchen chair, waiting for us.

"You move reality generator too far," he said amiably. "Mess up everything way bad."

"I messed up everything? People have gone mandrill out there, Fang! We almost got chainsawed, burned up, and mobbed, and it's not even noon yet!"

"No need to rave," he said. "Just move reality generator back." He looked at a little scrap of paper he'd been holding in his hand. "Move generator nine inches northeast. That all." He had a winning smile. "Wan' 'nother Sun Lik?"

"Those people are dangerous, Fang. They'd eat their young, given half a chance."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," he said meditatively. "But if you d'not fix, everybody get eat." He looked up the street and nodded in that direction.

"Have to go now," he said. "Need to save skin."

A pickup full of rednecks in yellowed T-shirts roared toward us with their Merle Haggard at 116 decibels. The pickup had been jacked up so the thirty-six inch wheels would fit halfway under the frame. The thing looked like a shoe box mounted on tractor tires, and had probably just been driven out of a showroom window. It still had a lot of stickers on it. The oversized engine hung below the bottom of the frame. It popped and

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shuddered after they turned it off and we could hear ourselves think. The neck that had been driving jumped down to street level, black cowboy hat, bloodshot eyes, "Call Me Redneck" T-shirt, and belt buckle big enough to hold a three-course meal.

"Hey, shitheel, this where that gook lives?" He was missing a couple of front teeth and had a tattoo up his arm that said, "Fuck you." A witty man. It looked like he had done it himself with a ball-point and a pocketknife. The pipe wrench he carried had some gooey brown stuff matted on its jaws.

"Gook?" I said, strolling back to the Buick.

"Don't dick me around, Shitly. We already got us a nigger boy and now we need us a gook."

I had the door to the car open now. "Hey," I said, "I know where there's an old folks' home. You could go stomp them real easy. Most of 'em's in wheelchairs." Then, to Cleetis, "Pop the hood." His pupils flared. "*Do as I say!*" It clicked open.

"We just want us a gook for now. Is this where...."

I lifted the hood, gave the rubber fuel line a stiff yank, and aimed it at the redneck. The electric fuel pump squirted gasoline far enough to significantly dampen his crud-yellow T-shirt.

"Hey, you bastard, you — "

A few quick steps, and I had my lighter against his sopping chest.

"Smoke?" I asked.

"Uhh..."

"I know. It's a tough question. Drop the wrench and give me your keys."

"Uhh."

"Wanna meet Jesus with all your skin still on?" I yelled in his face. He dropped the wrench, but stalled out on the key command. Bad short-term memory.

From inside the cab, one of the necks yelled down, "Screw 'im, Conway, he's bluffing."

"Well," Conway said, "I might burn to death." He seemed to be evaluating the pros and cons.

"C'mon, Con," the truck neck yelled down, "I know where another gook lives — "

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"Okay, Conway," I said, backing off a step, "I give up. I guess you geniuses saw right through me. Back up in the truck with your friends, Conway. C'mon, move it."

"Tolja!" one of the necks jeered.

"Dickhead!" the other one remarked.

Conway just heh-heh'ed as he got up and slid into the driver's seat.

I hopped up on the running board, kept my face well out of the way, stuck my hand in the window, and flicked that little black wheel on my lighter.

The inside of the cab WHOOFed and rednecks shot at great velocity from the doors making all-purpose exclamations of general surprise. Conway had a few flames on him, but nothing that wouldn't go out as soon as his flimsy T-shirt burned off him.

"Cleetis!"

"Boss?" The parolee had cowered under the Buick's steering wheel.

"Get in the pickup. This time, I'm driving."

I saw his nostrils flare and his lips went white around the edges. But he didn't give me any backtalk.

There was a refrigerator full of Budweiser under the dash. Newer vehicles seemed to come with everything. "Open me one of those," I said. I fired up the engine and ground it into gear.

The two rednecks that had been blown out the passenger door were coming back at us. Some people.

They got a grip on the truck bed and started pulling themselves up.

"All right," I told Cleetis as I popped the clutch and raced us down Fang's street, "hang tight." Nothing breaks in a new engine like high-speed stop-and-go driving, and I was in the mood for it.

I weaved the pickup violently down the middle of the street, slammed the brakes a couple of times and from the back came the sudden shrieks and fading screams of disoriented rednecks.

"Are they still there?" I yelled at Cleetis over the howling of the engine.

He looked back and then grinned. "All gone, boss. Now you can slow down."

I floored it. My patience had run out. There was work to be done.

I figured the best way to deal with those raving halfwits who were out

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there dogging up the right-of-way would be to go at them at high velocity while laying on the horn. If they got out of the way, fine, and if they didn't, their dangling remnants would serve a warning to the others. And if they ganged up and tried to slow us down with solid walls of human flesh, the inertia of the truck would carry us a long satisfying way. I laid on the horn. Cleetis lost his tan.

Ignoroids can move fast when they want to. They parted like the Red Sea — but we were, after all, on a mission to save the partially civilized world from a tidal wave of moronism. We clipped a few of them before they realized we were serious. The crowded sidewalks were a blur of screaming gap-toothed dipsticks who gave us the finger and threw at us whatever was at hand. A few buck-knives clacked off the windshield and a couple pot-bellied bikers dug garbage out of cans and slung it at us.

It was a couple miles back to the vacant lot, and I thought Cleetis might need a little distraction, so I turned up the radio.

"...shore you can sit on my lap, as we head South, nothing to fear. Let's play telephone, put one in my mouth, and one in my ear."

Cleetis stared at one of the eight blaring speakers in the cab like it was a TV set.

I hit one of the buttons and changed the station.

"Okay, we do the news," the announcer said. "Um, a Toronado was sighed, sighted...somewhere. What's this button for? Okay, right. People should stay away — Ow! It's caught in your zipper."

I shut it off. Obviously we weren't the only ones with problems.

What had merely been an epidemic of sexually transmitted stupidity was now evidently some kind of rolling flux of brain-fade. Would it hit us before we got to the reality generator? And would we then start acting like speed-eating suck-heads like everybody else?

Maybe it only worked on people who had already been exposed to the virus, who had gone to bed with someone stupider than they were. Visions of Madame Helga's tattooed flanks swam before my eyes.

I just wanted to get this over with.

Clipped to the bottom of the dash was an added-on toggle switch that was labeled NO. A truck with a nitrous oxide tank hooked up to the intake manifold? A very handy option. I took this as a sign. The addition of a little nitrous to the combustion chambers would probably decrease the harmful

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emissions of this beast and at the same time boost the horsepower by fifty or sixty percent. I flipped the switch and watched the view out the side windows blur as the blood drained to the back of my head. Steering became a challenge, but at least Cleetis stopped whimpering after the G-force pressed the air out of his lungs.

The scene at the vacant lot was something like Heironymus Bosch might have painted if he had been chained in front of a TV for a month and force-fed a diet of Twinkies and full-sugar Kool-Aid.

The violent black vortex hovered over the junked car and whirled a mile into the air, as black as a hole in the sky. As far as I could tell, it didn't make a sound or ruffle a scrap of trash on the ground, but its effect on the people was one of unrestrained violence.

The ugliest part was the fascination people had for this thing. They came in droves, in hordes, ripping and shoving at each other, people climbing over other people, trampling them, howling and slashing at each other to get near the old car, but whatever they saw there, it wasn't the piece of junk I saw. They were enraptured by the force that drew them closer.

As soon as they got within ten feet whatever effect it was having, it had royally, and they turned away from it with a look on their faces like their brains had fried inside their heads. They charged grab-assing, slugging, groping, and raving with renewed frenzy as they fought their way back out and clear of the mob, where they ran amok through the streets, attacking anything, pounding on cars, breaking windows, or copulating like insects in swarming mounds of arms and legs.

I kept one hand on the horn as I circled around to the southwest side of the wreck. At one point two guys stood in front of the truck and screamed that I should engage in onanistic practices. When they wouldn't move, I ran over them.

Actually I only ran over their legs, but in the side mirror I saw they were unrepentant — they shrieked at me and gave me the finger until other ignoroids, running crazed away from the vortex, found them and kicked them into regret.

I eased us forward to the critical boundary, expecting at any time to start wanting to rape and pillage. Cleetis hadn't been making any noise, but he was glassy-eyed and sweat slicked his face.

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"I just want to nudge it about nine inches," I yelled at him over the noise of the engine and the ambient screaming. "Hang on. This could be hairy."

He seemed to be nodding. "Ha," he said limply.

"Good man. Keep a stiff upper wrist. Here we go."

I put it in low and four-wheel-drive and let the shuddering vehicle creep forward.

It was interesting, getting stupid like that. Every foot closer we went, the more pissed off at everything I got. I got indignant that I would end up in a stupid place like this, surrounded by stupid people, dicking around with a stupid wrecked car in an ugly stupid vacant lot, and I didn't care what happened to me, I just wanted to give all those A-holes out there what they deserved for being what they were. I seethed with longing for Old Testament justice, pure and simple: round up the infidels, sell their children for street work in L.A., rape the women till boredom set in, and sell the men for bone meal. They were all animals anyway. Exterminate all of them down to the last post-menstrual grandmother and sell their hair for rug padding. Exterminate them all.

When the undercarriage of the pickup started nudging the junker back to the position Fang wanted it to be in, for every inch it moved, the saner I became. And when I got to the point where I was willing to let most of the swine go on living, I cut the engine.

Everything went silent The mob had stopped circling and stood around looking embarrassed at each other. Slowly they began shuffling away, back to their homes. Overhead, the last traces of the black whirlpool of whatever-the-hell-it-was dissipated, and I could hear Cleetis start breathing again.

"Boss," he said.

"Yo, Cleetis."

"Can I have tomorrow off?"

"If Fang comes through with his end of the deal, I'll send you to Vegas for a week. With a bonus."

There was a tentative knocking on the bottom of the truck door.

I opened it up and looked down.

My skin turned to ice.

It was a ten-year-old Laotian girl with an armful of gardenias.

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"Howdy," she said in a piping little voice.

"*Don't say the rest of it!*' I yelled at the kid. "*Please don't say it!*"

Cleetis began clawing at his seatbelts and screaming for his mother.

The kid looked puzzled and I expected to see smoke come drizzling out of her nose, but she handed me up the flowers and smiled prettily. "Goo'bye," she said, and walked away, her brown little bare feet making neat footprints in the pulverized dirt.

WHEN VERA let me in her front door, I handed her the package with the two steaks she had asked me to bring. I was hungry and imagined hot steaks crisscrossed with searmarks and dripping with garlicked herbs.

"You're a dear," she said. "Cleetis with you?" She had on her gray work clothes and a tight-headed mouse-brown wig she wore in public.

"Cleetis caught a bus for Vegas an hour ago." I'd given him an extra $2,000 and I was once again a monied person deeply concerned about the IRS.

"Like a drink?"

"D'you have any beer?"

She handed me a Kirin from the refrigerator. She was a woman of taste. I hated to drink it fast, but I had done a lot of sweating that day.

I asked her if she knew what was being said about the disturbance across town that afternoon.

"The police think it was a race riot, but Atlanta says there are some indications that it might have been related to STS. Some kind of massive outbreak. But it doesn't fit the pattern. What do you know about it?" She peeled the tape off the package of meat.

"I've been out driving around all day, re-familiarizing myself with human nature," I said without answering. "Living with Cleetis can give a person a distorted perspective, you know." She was handling the meat suggestively. "Can I take a shower before we eat?"

"Eat?" she said. "Oh. You mean the steaks. They're not for us to eat." She pulled off her wig and took a couple of clips out of her hair. After combing her fingers through it and shaking her head, her hair puffed up hugely. She unbuttoned her jacket and hung it over a chair. "Ramsden, what do you *really* know about what happened?"

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"I would just as soon not be on a steady diet of Thorazine and electroshock, but I can say this: According to my source, everything is connected to everything else, so that if you, say, move a piece of junk across a vacant lot, the effects can be immense. The riot and STS, I was led to believe, were aspects of the same thing. Beyond that, truth, as I know it, is elusive."

She cocked her head a little and gazed at me. The moment was broken by the chirp of her phone. She answered it, listened briefly, and handed it over to me. "For you."

"What," I said into the thing.

"Ramsden! Vreedon here! Long story! I'm out! I was commuted!"

"How did you find me? And stop shouting!"

"Long story! Hey, I met this guy named Kam Fang! He showed me this incredible pyramid deal! You ever hear of these MENSA people? I'm gunna be rich! All I need is about five thousand — "

I hung up. "Wrong number."

Vera glanced back over her shoulder at me as she ambled into the bedroom, steaks in hand. I followed her, ready for anything. "Mr. Ramsden, you have nice eyes."

"You have nice legs, Miss Kamchatka." When she moved, she moved more ways than one.

"Shall one of us seduce the other?"

"Seduction requites subtlety. And I've had a long day."

She lifted the bedroom window and threw the steaks out. I heard huge dogs growling and massive jaws crunching bones.

"That'll keep them quiet for a while, in case they hear any unusual noises."

"Ms. Kamchatka."

"Mr. Ramsden."

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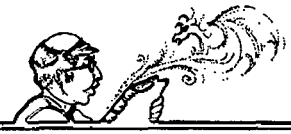

Curiosities

The Unicorn with Silver Shoes by Ella Young, 1932

CELTIC mythology produces many favorites in modern fantasy—mostly Welsh, with the *Mabinogion* a convenient source for Kenneth Morris, Evangeline Walton, Lloyd Alexander, and Katherine Kurtz, *et al.*, or Scottish (some dozen Tamlins alone from the *Child Ballads*). For Irish mythology, however, there is no single convenient source, and Irish-based fantasy is rarer.

Ella Young (1867-1957) was a teacher and folklorist. Her original fantasy, *The Unicorn with Silver Shoes* (illus. Robert Lawson), was the product of years of research. When the 1923 edition of *Celtic Wonder Tales* (illus. Maud Gonne) appeared, Young had already begun extrapolating from her sources. The Wonder Tale "A Good Action" became the first chapter of *Unicorn*. In both, the protagonist is Balor's (or Ballor's) Son — King Balor in the myths was a monster, and his Son a cipher needed to report his decree (retold by Young in *The Wonder Smith and his Son*, 1927; illus. Boris Artzybasheff). But it was Young's own idea to give the young prince a will of his own, and a longing for faery beauty — also comic incompetence in trying to achieve it. His Good Action wins him a golden apple, but he eats it before he can show it as proof of his exploit. By the time he has learned to shoe a unicorn with silver, the unicorn has faded out of existence. In short, Young found that a monstrous Fomorian was, after all, an image of what it means to be a human, and longing to be more.

The *Unicorn* is long out of print, but the *Tales*, the *Smith*, and Young's 1929 retelling of the Finn McCool tales, *The Tangle-Coated Horse*, illus. Vera Bock, were reprinted in 1991 by Floris Books of Edinburgh, with a U.S. outlet in the Anthroposophic Press, RR4 Box 94 A1, Hudson NY 12534.

— Ruth Berman

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"For God's sake, Ellie, we're vegetarians!"

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